

**New Canaan Presbyterian Church,  
Sunday, May 5, 2019**

**Psalm 23  
Matthew 16:24-26**

### **Soul Searching**

**O, Thou who art the Way, the Truth and the Life; show us the way, and help us to follow it. Make plain to us the truth and guide us to grasp it. Open up before us the Life and teach us to live it. Through the power of your living Word. Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen**

**In Saint Matthew, the 16th chapter, the 26th verse:**

**For what will it profit you if you gain the whole world, and lose your own soul? Or what will you give in exchange for your soul**

**And these words in Psalm 23, verse 3**

**He restoreth... God restoreth my soul."**

### **Soul Searching**

**Early along in her years at medical school, our second daughter, Fiona, called to invite me into the city one afternoon, invited me to visit her in the anatomy lab. By the time I got there things, as I recall, had been mostly covered up, and there was little actual anatomy to be seen. But then Fiona dipped her hand into a container there beside her bench, lifted out a spongy, wrinkled mass, about as big as a good-size grapefruit, and set it gently into my hands. And I gazed – partly at first in horror, but chiefly in wonder – I stood there and gazed at the human brain. It was both smaller and lighter than I would have imagined, smaller indeed than any computer I had ever seen at that time. And those grey, intricately woven wrinkles, those deep winding crevices; what thoughts, as Fiona then put it to me, what dreams, desires, what inspirations had flowed across and through them over the years? Where had they all come from, where had they gone? Was this truly all that it came down to in the end, a couple of pounds of**

**soggy, convoluted matter?**

**That's, after all, what they are telling us nowadays. We are living in our time through a genuine explosion in the sciences of life. The primacy of physics and astronomy, the probing of the galaxies and the structure of the atom to discover where we came from and are headed for, all this has been replaced in the spotlight by the biologists and chemists who question who we are, and what we are made up of. And the results... the results so far, are not exactly encouraging for this "soul" that we just read about in Psalm 23.**

**He restoreth my soul.**

**Among those thousands upon thousands of genes catalogued by the Human Genome Project, all those building blocks that make up the essential human being, there seems to have been no thought, no serious search undertaken for any gene that holds the blueprint for the soul. Those who investigate the workings of the brain, the dendrites and synapses, all those stimuli that trigger our actions and thoughts; these researchers see absolutely no need even to posit the soul's existence. They explain it all much more simply as the product of reactions among chemicals, reactions that have been programmed, as it were, laid down in their inevitable pathways, across all the long millennia of human evolution. So that if you want to know why you love and hate, why you know fear and anger, kindness, even courage, it's all a matter of, it all boils down to... chemistry.**

**Now that can be reassuring, in a way, at least for a short time. After all, it takes the edge off, takes away the blame, the responsibility, the guilt. It's all in my genes, is it not? I'm only doing what my chemistry tells me to do.! .**

**And yet... and yet... is it really all that simple? Because once you move out of**

the laboratory, once you turn the page from the science section and begin reading about the arts, or the courts, the opinion pages, even the sports, you re-enter a realm where souls and values, rights, wrongs and responsibilities still do appear to be quite real... in some cases, in fact, very real indeed. O.K. Maybe the biologists and neurologists, for all their ultra-high-powered microscopes and scanners, can find no trace of it; maybe the psychologists, with their ego, super ego and id, can find no room for it; but whatever it is or is not, this "soul" is an actuality most of us still live with, and have to reckon with, most of our days.

### He restoreth my soul

Suppose we went about this search, then, this soul-searching, in a different way. Suppose we abandoned, for this morning at least, the laboratory, the microscope, all the amazing apparatus of the clinical approach. And suppose we looked at life instead, this life we actually live together. Suppose, just for today, we asked ourselves: “If I had a soul, what would it feel like. And what could it feel like for it to be restored? What kind of experience might this poet of Psalm twenty three have been referring to when he wrote these words about this God who is our Shepherd, this God who, as he so memorably put it, ...restoreth my soul?” Have you ever had your soul restored?

A couple of New Years ago now – a couple of Hogmanays ago – my wife Mhairi and I spent the holiday with old friends on New Hampshire's Lake Winnepesaukee. Late afternoon on New Year's Eve I sat and watched the year's last reflected sunset gleam across the frozen lake and brush with fire the treetops and the mountain rim of the Ossipee range beyond. And even as these symbols of time's fleetingness passed by, I knew deep within an undeniable, irresistible timelessness, a somehow eternal sense of blessedness and peace, I sensed and

knew the restoration of the soul.

It happens with people too, not just with inanimate things. One December evening in Philadelphia I took our granddaughter Aissa to the Academy of Music to see “The Nutcracker.” And in the splendor of that elegant old concert hall, the familiar strains of Tchaikovsky’s soaring music, the scenery, the drama, the eternal grace in human form that is captured in the ballet, and above all in the bewitched gaze of 12 year-old Aissa – as she then was – my spirit was lifted, my heart was warmed and yes, my very soul was restored.

Or again, several autumns ago, while serving my last church in NY City, beside the sickbed of a friend who, in his early 50s, was working his way through the devastating final stages of ALS - Lou Gehrig's Disease. I sat beside his bed, held his hand, (touch can be so important), chatted of this and that, reminiscing of his work with Jim Henson and the Muppets. My friend was the creator of the puppet Grover. Finally, at his request, I prayed with him that matchless prayer of John Henry Newman,

O Lord, preserve us all the day-long of this troublous life until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then in thy mercy grant us safe lodging, and a holy rest and peace at the last.

What is it in us can be moved to tears and then beyond by a set of words, a simple song, a sunset or a symphony? What is it can be warmed yet once again by all the ever-new delights of springtime, crocus and daffodil, blossom and birdsong; or led into laughter by the clear, unsullied joy of little children; hushed to silent wonder by the radiant turning of the autumn leaves? More than this... more important than this, what is it in us shines still when all around is

dark and dreary, sings despite a knifing pain, writes poetry or plays the violin inside the hell of a concentration camp and even, in rare, eternal moments, leads one to accept pain, discomfort, even death for the sake of someone, something greater than oneself, for the living out of love?

Oh yes, it can all be explained. There are those who will tell you, will insist, that these are merely programs, patterns of adaptation laid down in the brain by the passing of the centuries. I choose to believe something different, however. I choose to believe that the poets and painters, the dreamers know more than that, know better than that. I choose to believe that more than genes, DNA, or inbred strategies for survival, have brought us here today, that there exists in all of us a hunger deep within – a hunger of the eternal that is in us, a hunger for the eternal that is beyond us and before us, behind, above and all about us, for the eternal that is God. And I believe that our Lord had more than synapses, nerve endings in mind when he warned that we could gain the whole world, but in that gaining forfeit our own souls.

We can lose them, you know, or if not lose, because that would negate the triumph of the cross, if not lose them, then thin them out, wear them away so thoroughly we forget they are even there. Then comes this beloved old psalm, this greatest song of faith ever entrusted to words and to silence:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... He restoreth my soul.

And hearing we respond, we reach out, we cross that great divide of fear and self-protection and receive the Word, the Word born in a manger in our midst, we receive it and reflect it back in deeds of love, justice and mercy upon all around. And that is the soul, that is the human soul at work.

I heard not long ago – on public radio actually – of one of the key scientific discoveries of recent time; the discovery that neutrinos – those totally elusive particles that no one has ever seen, ever will see – that neutrinos may well have mass. If they do, even the most infinitesimal vestige of mass, that may go a long way to solving the problem of missing matter in the universe. But do you know how they discovered this? An enormous bubble of water, several million gallons I understand, was buried beneath a mountain. And every so often, as one of these hitherto undetectable neutrinos passed through that great mountain and that vast body of water other particles were somehow affected – dislodged as it were – providing evidence, albeit highly indirect, that there is more to the neutrino than just thin air.

Evidence, on the other hand, evidence for the existence of the soul, is a somewhat less complicated matter. Let me suggest that if you really must have proof, if evidence is important to you, then look around you; and wherever love meets human need with grace, care and courage, wherever hospitality is freely offered and joyfully received, wherever gifts are opened, lives are opened, pain, ignorance and fear dispelled, and gentleness lived out, there you will see, there you will find the soul at work. And that is what this Lord who is our shepherd restores for us, restores again and yet again, in the miracle of grace.

That great Welsh preacher, Elam Davies, ended his farewell sermon with this reminiscence. It was an evening of glowing sunset and he and his wife had driven to the top of a local Welsh landmark to catch the spectacular show. All God's kaleidoscope of color was spread before them like a cosmic canvas, when they noticed an old, battered car pulling in alongside them. An elderly couple emerged and moved to the rear doors where lay their son of later years, a child

now full grown, yet so terribly incapacitated he could not even sit up on the car seat. Somehow the two of them contrived to slide his legs around and hold him at the door facing out, but he couldn't lift his head. Then (in Davies own words) “Just as the sun in all its magnificence was to give its final burst of glory, as if God were dazzling us by the pyrotechnics of his universe, they put their finger – the father did, and the mother a little later – they put their finger under this young man's chin and just pointed him out there... they just pointed him out there.”

And behold! the human soul, revealed, restored, and in the face of all the glory, all the magnificence of God's universe, the center, the source, the secret of it all.

**He restoreth my soul.**

Let us then nurture them, these souls, immortal souls of ours. Let us treasure them in these latter years, support and sustain them with the daily bread of prayer, meditation, right living. And let us be aware and ready for those times when God, this God who is our shepherd, will reach out amid the silence and the sacred, and touch us to restore our very souls.

**For what shall it profit if we gain the whole world, and lose our own soul. Or what shall we give in exchange for our soul.**

**Let us pray:**

**Lord, restore our souls. Refresh within each one of us those deep, long neglected reservoirs of the spirit. Then renew us in your service, in the daily living of your grace and peace. For that is joy to us, and hope, and life eternal. In Christ we pray. AMEN.**