

“What can we see now that we may not have seen before?”
 Lent 4A (March 22, 2020) - **COVID-19 (SUNDAY 2)**
 Scriptures: Psalm 23; John 9:1-17, 26-38; Revelation 21:5a
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen.<<

The documentary *Free Solo* is an Academy Award winning film that tells the story of Alex Honnold. Alex, as he's known in the film, was obsessed with climbing El Capitan - “El Cap” it's called - a vertical rock formation of sheer granite in Yosemite National Park. El Cap's granite face is 3,200 feet tall - and part of it is known in climbing lingo as “sheer glass” - granite so smooth that climbers can only rely on the tiniest of divots and grooves in the rock to support their weight, sometimes balancing themselves with just the tip of a toe, gripping an imprint with just two or three fingers. The first to ever reach the top of El Cap was a team of climbers in 1958; it took them 45 days over 18 months because it was too challenging and exhausting to climb in one shot. Alex refers to El Cap in the film as “the most impressive wall on earth.” “Unfathomably huge.” The film *Free Solo* is about Alex climbing El Cap...alone...without ropes.

Free solo climbing is something only elite climbers will attempt because of its obvious risks. Less than 1% of climbers do it. There is no margin for error when one is alone without ropes hundreds of feet up a sheer glass granite face. One climber said of soloing El Cap, “imagine an Olympic gold medal level athletic achievement” with absolutely “no margin for error.” “You have to do it perfectly.” Climbers who free solo claim that they can climb faster and more simply without ropes and harnesses, relying entirely on their strength and skill and endurance to reach the top. And because it requires such intense focus - dwelling so completely in the present moment as one ascends - free soloists claim to enter a Zen-like state, and then experience a rush of elation after a successful climb. In the film, Alex says free soloing requires a “much higher level of focus [I]t's a whole different experience [than climbing with ropes].” “If you're seeking perfection,” he says, “free soloing is as close as you can get.”

Before attempting to free solo El Cap, Alex was known in the climbing universe as “a free soloing phenomenon,” - one of the top two or three climbers on the planet, according to *The New York Times*¹ - soloing over a thousand walls throughout the world. He'd climbed other big walls in Yosemite in California, walls in Utah, and in Mexico, in British Columbia, in Northern Ireland, and the list goes on. But no one had ever climbed El Cap without ropes or harnesses before. Alex had climbed El Cap over 40 times *with* ropes, and for years he'd considered soloing it. But each year he would look at it, consider it, and then say to himself, “that's too scary,” and then strap on the ropes and harnesses instead.

He couldn't resist, though - the urge to do something no human had ever done before was too enticing. Spoiler alert for those of you who haven't seen the film: Alex Honnold does successfully free solo El Cap, in what can only be called a majestic feat of human achievement - “one of the great athletic feats of any kind, ever,” as one of Alex's friends put it. And since you're all sequestered at home, participating this morning via live stream, you

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/11/magazine/the-heart-stopping-climbs-of-alex-honnold.html>

might add the film *Free Solo* to your must watch list while you're hunkered down. The cinematography is gorgeous, and the story is suspenseful and inspiring.

As I watched the film again this past week, I noticed two aspects of it that I think speak directly to what we're all going through right now. The first is the reality of just how fragile our lives are. We're all aware of our mortality, as Alex says in the film. "Soloing," he says, "makes it feel far more immediate and much more present." Like the virus, I suppose. I've had to give myself a sabbath from looking at graphs and infection rate data. Because it's scary. It's too big to fully grasp. Everything is happening so quickly that we can't process it all. We're having serious discussions with family members now that three months ago would've seemed unimaginable. And we're being reminded daily as the numbers continue to rise of just how fragile our lives really are. But there's another aspect of Alex's monumental achievement that has stuck with me this week, and which also speaks to our current situation: it's our capacity as humans, inspired by God's creative spirit - driven by God's will for us to live fully - it's our capacity as humans to meet challenges in creative ways, to see possibilities where none seemed to exist before. To *see* differently.

Two of today's three scripture readings come from the lectionary: Psalm 23 and John ch. 9. Both are texts that remind us of life's fragility and also of seeing new possibilities. Psalm 23 is one of the most well-known texts in all of scripture; many of us memorized it in Sunday School. Psalm 23 imagines God as a shepherd and we as fragile sheep, needing a gentle, guiding hand. Families celebrating the lives of loved ones who've passed away request this Psalm more than any other to be read at funerals and memorial services, because it's so comforting with its rich poetry that names God as a Guiding Shepherd who leads to green pastures and calm waters, who prepares a rich feast with overflowing cups to restore souls. Commentators on Psalm 23 urge preachers to resist over-interpreting this sacred text - especially this Sunday when we're all reminded of life's fragility. The beautifully poetic and exquisite language of the Psalm stands on its own, say the commentators. So, they urge preachers to just read the Psalm and let the beauty of the language wash over the listeners. I'm going to read this Psalm in a moment - in fact, I'm going to read it in two very different translations: one from the most well-known version, the King James, and the other from Robert Alter's translation - Alter is a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at Berkeley. But before I read, let me get personal for a moment. During our time of sequester, our family has been reading Shakespeare's *Macbeth* after we eat dinner. One of us reads aloud while the rest of us listen. But here's the thing, and let's just be honest. When we modern hearers listen to Shakespeare, we don't always grasp every nuance and detail, every jot and tittle, of his language. His language is too layered and too full and, well, it's old. But it's beautiful. And so, before we *Macbeth*, we remind ourselves as a family that even if we don't grasp everything Shakespeare is saying, we can still savor the beauty and rhythm of his language. So also with Psalm 23. We may not get everything the Psalmist is saying; but maybe that's not the point for us right now during this time of fragility. Maybe we need to just sit and listen, and let the language wash over us - the language of comfort, the language of God-as-shepherd, the language of "green pastures" and "still waters" and "restored souls" and of banquets and overflowing cups and "goodness and mercy." Just sit with the language and let our souls be restored by the poetry. So, here are two versions of this comforting Psalm. First, the King James:

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

- 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The second is Robert Alter's translation - different, more rugged, but also beautiful:....

No one knows exactly what the Psalmist was going through when this Psalm was penned. But the reference to "enemies" makes me think that the Psalmist was facing some existential crisis - a crisis when human lives were on the line, when people were afraid, when the times were uncertain and overwhelming, and the "enemies" of fear and doubt and uncertainty were pressing in - a time when the sheep were reminded of their fragility; a time when they needed a gentle but strong shepherd to guide them - to be *with* them as they walked through a dark valley.

I think this Gentle, Guiding Shepherd has been doing just that over the past days and weeks for us. Maybe this Guiding Shepherd has been at work - has been subtly moving and flowing - to remind us all of just how interconnected we really are. One person Tweeted about the virus on Friday, "What still gets me on almost an hourly basis is that this is happening *everywhere* in *every* country. New York, Laos, Reunion Island. This is," he Tweeted, "almost certainly the most profound real-time event in history. It is a shared experience like no other we've ever known as a species." Richard Rohr said this week, "We're all in this together - every continent, country, class, religion, race, age, or gender. We're all subject to this crisis. Suffering has an ability to pull you into oneness." The virus pays no attention to the things we name as different. It doesn't care about our national borders or our racial or gender identities; it doesn't care whether we're rich or poor. It is the great equalizer of our time.

People across the world are embracing this. On Friday, Dutch historian Rutger Bregman wrote:² "Disasters and crises bring out the best in us [as human beings]. ... Sure," he writes, "our news feeds are flooded with cynical stories and comments. A report on armed men stealing rolls of toilet paper in Hong Kong, or one about the Australian women who got into a fistfight in a Sydney supermarket. ... [But, he says,] for every antisocial jerk out there, there are thousands of doctors, cleaners, and nurses working around the clock on our behalf. For every panicky hoarder shoving entire supermarket shelves into their cart," he says, "there are 10,000 [other] people doing their best to prevent the virus from spreading further. ..." One Wuman living in Wuhan said: "'We've learned how to accept help from others. Because of this quarantine, we have bonded with and supported each other in ways that I've never experienced in nine years of living here.' ... In Siena and Naples, both on complete lockdown, people are singing together from the balconies of their homes." And each night people across Italy and Spain stand on their balconies to applaud the nurses and doctors who've sacrificed so much to save lives. "Children in Italy are writing" notes "on streets and

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https://ideas.ted.com/disasters-and-crises-bring-out-the-best-in-us/?utm_source=t.co&utm_content=ideas-blog&utm_term=social-science&utm_campaign=social&utm_medium=referral

walls” that say, “everything will be all right.” Musicians like Coldplay’s Chris Martin are doing live stream, social distancing concerts on Instagram for fans around the world. The famed “Christ the Redeemer” statue that overlooks Rio de Janeiro has been lit up with the flags of all the countries affected by the virus.³ And people everywhere are experimenting with virtual communities. “All over the world,” according to one *Washington Post* article, “people are [now] ... staging virtual baking sessions, art classes, dance parties, book clubs, birthday parties, and family dinners.”⁴ And faith communities, including our own, have been live streaming services and offering all sorts of ways for people to connect online. Ithaca’s own State Theatre Tweeted a picture of its sign, which captures this renewed sense of worldwide community. The sign reads “We are all in this together.” “We may see [as this crisis unfolds],” writes Rutger Bregman, “a dawning awareness of [our] dependence [on each other], [and a renewed sense of] community and solidarity. ... I believe,” he says, that “we can grow closer in the end, finding each other in this crisis.”

Maybe *these* are the green pastures and still waters that God the Guiding Shepherd is leading us to right now. Maybe God is weaving us into a tighter human family filled with the fruit of God’s spirit - the fruit of generosity and charity and goodness and mercy toward one another. Maybe this is a time for us to see *differently*, like the man who regained his sight in today’s gospel story. Maybe now is the time for us to *see* possibilities and opportunities for building community and solidarity and hope as a single, human family. And maybe now is the time for us to see each person we share this planet with as a beloved child of God worthy of the same love and compassion and care we would show to the members of our own families. The same God who is the parent of us all once promised, “behold, I am making all things new.” Amen.

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<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/03/19/818557823/brazils-christ-the-redeemer-lit-up-with-flags-of-countries-battling-coronavirus>

⁴ <https://www.thelily.com/8-tips-for-hosting-the-perfect-virtual-hangout/>