

Sermon Psalm 23 April 17, 2016

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 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.

Please turn to page 137 of the red hymnal and let's read this prayer in unison.

[Read Psalm 23.] Many of us know this psalm by heart, and most often we pray it at funerals as a reminder that even in death God's presence is with us. In the lectionary readings this week (a set of scripture readings that includes a psalm, and a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the gospel, and the epistles for each Sunday) the gospel lesson is a look back, before the crucifixion, at Jesus and His opponents. The Jews were celebrating Hanukkah at the temple, and Jesus was there with them. "The opposition circled around Him and asked, 'How long will you test our patience? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I have told you, but you don't believe. The works I do in My Father's name testify about Me, but you don't believe because you don't belong to My sheep. My sheep listen to My voice. I know them and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of My hand.'" (John 10:23-28) Today's lectionary psalm is the 23rd, "The Lord is my shepherd," and when He was teaching and responding to His opponents Jesus echoed this psalm: He called Himself the "Gate for the sheep" and "the Good Shepherd."

We pray the 23rd Psalm at funerals but it's a psalm of life, of trust in God's goodness and faithfulness, and confidence in God's presence. The third word in the psalm "is" puts this prayer in the present tense. Not the Lord was my shepherd or will

be... but is. Right now, the Lord is our shepherd. The translation we read together with Michael and Teresa is from the Complete Jewish Bible and it's what our Confirmation class chose, three years ago, as their scripture. When we learn scripture from a certain translation or we know a bible story by heart, it can become overly familiar to the point that we don't hear it... we don't see the images it provokes... we don't marvel at what it tells us about God. It's good to have more than one bible translation to give new sight, and new perspective, to these ancient words.

“Adonai is my shepherd; I lack nothing. The Lord has me lie down in grassy pastures; the Lord leads me beside quiet water... Adonai restores my inner person.” It's hard to imagine the feeling of lacking nothing. There's absolutely nothing in our culture that supports the idea that we have enough. But we've prayed with the psalmist, “I lack nothing.” Do you remember this word (we've prayed it at Seder dinners on Holy Thursday) “Dayenu”? It's what the Jews pray when they remember all of God's amazing works on their behalf... as each one of God's deeds is recalled and the entire community responds, “Dayenu.” It means that if God had done only that marvelous thing for Israel, it would have been enough. But they go on to recount more of God's goodness and faithfulness... each time responding “Dayenu. Even that one thing, Lord, would have been enough.”

Dayenu is an amazing and powerful thing to pray when I can't see my way forward. When the future is unknown and looks threatening (and what I don't have enough of is strength and faith) I go back as far as I can and remember that all of my life God has loved me and known me and I've never doubted it. I've always known God's presence. “Dayenu. Even that, Lord, would have been enough.” I remember always

knowing church as a home, as a place to be loved, and to be shaped in godly living. “Dayenu. Even that, Lord, would have been enough.” I continue to look back and remember and pray “Dayenu” until I am again convinced... and I can reclaim that “The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.” Praying “Dayenu” is a good spiritual practice when it feels like there isn’t enough... strength or love or security or whatever it is you’re longing for. It’s a way to reclaim the important things you have (most of which are not things) and to be present to the goodness of God, instead of imagining the future where there might not be enough.

What does it mean, “God restores my inner person?” When we pray Dayenu, or when we practice thanks-giving, we’re reconstructing our life with God... and we see who we are: we are God’s. We are known, we are loved, we are given unique work to do to bless and to help heal the world. This is real soul-care: to claim it and live into it... this understanding that you are God’s own, and that you are gifted for work in shalom (hope, peace, wellness... the word shalom encompasses the biblical idea of enough/abundance for all people) God has given you gifts to help build God’s kingdom. We learn and practice soul-work in community by loving each other, and offering forgiveness, and acknowledging and calling on each other’s gifts, by serving those in need... and by practicing Sabbath, which is the rest and refreshment God offers us “in green pastures and beside still waters.” This part of Psalm 23 is the prayer and the claim of the church: “The Lord restores my inner person.”

“The Lord guides me in right paths for the sake of God’s own name. Even if I pass through death-dark ravines... I will fear no disaster; for You are with me; Your rod and staff reassure me.” To not fear when we’re in danger seems counterintuitive and

maybe stupid... but the psalmist asks us to trust that we are not alone... to believe that we are held in the Shepherd's care. The images of a shepherd's rod and crook are unfamiliar to most us but were well-known to the Israelites. A shepherd's rod was a walking stick and something used against predators, and the U-shape of the crook could be slipped around the neck of a sheep to gather them in, or pull them from harm's way. It was the shepherd's job to do anything to protect the sheep.

The images of the rod and staff tell of God's presence always with us, watching out for us, guiding us, caring for us even in a death-dark ravine... the most frightening place for a sheep (who frighten easily, and spook each other, and run in a herd, and can seriously hurt themselves.) The rod and staff tell us of the need to trust God, as a sheep trusts the shepherd, even when we're stuck in a death-dark ravine. A good spiritual practice in those times is to remember (which means to put back together) the times you've experienced God's presence. This can be "spiritual" experiences of God and it can be seeing the faces of friends and family who've come to your aid, who've been present to you when you were in a dark ravine, who were the hands and heart of God for you. The psalmist affirms to himself (and maybe he's reminding God as well) "You are with me." Throughout the bible it's the underlying theme; it's what God affirmed to us in Jesus, who is Emmanuel; God is present with us.

"You prepare a table for me, even as my enemies watch... You anoint my head with oil from an overflowing cup." Even in the midst of fear, in the presence of enemies, God is with us. Even while our enemies watch God is loving us, and God is loving our enemies. God spreads out a blanket and a feast for us... and its abundance may allow us to invite our enemies to sit and eat as well. It might be an unpalatable idea but God's

love is not exclusive; God's love can't be channeled or kept from some. God loves. Us all. Even our enemies. And in some mysterious way (maybe only in God's heart) that unites us with our enemies. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who persecute you." When we celebrate Holy Communion we gather at the Lord's Table with friends and coworkers and maybe with... enemies. Here at the Table we're given a glimpse of that heavenly banquet table where we'll sit in God's presence, with the saints, with Jesus as the Host of that great meal, and we'll be one... all divisions dissolved in the presence of God's great love. A good spiritual practice when dealing with someone perceived as an enemy is to have coffee or share a meal with them. Eat together with no other agenda than that you are both being fed from God's hand.

"You anoint my head with oil from an overflowing cup." God's love flows over you, and anoints you, as kings were anointed, as a sign of God's favor and God's delight in you. May we - and our enemies - experience God's love and favor as blessings that spill into an already overflowing cup. There's enough of God's love for all the world.

"Goodness and grace will pursue me every day of my life; and I will live in the house of Adonai for years and years to come." Haven't you realized that you're pursued - chased - by God's goodness and grace? The psalmist has confidence that God's love is not passive, hoping that we will notice God. Rather God is chasing us. This is the fourth Sunday of Easter, which is a season as well as an event. The thrill of resurrection has begun to pale because... God's reign is not complete... because this is not heaven... because all creation is still groaning with labor pains for God's Kingdom to be

born. We've had glimpses of resurrection, like the disciples had, but Easter seems already in the past. This is our real life with death-dark ravines and enemies and there are good reasons to be afraid. And yet Easter has happened, and God's Kingdom has begun (so keep your eyes open for glimpses of resurrection!) and so we hope, and believe, and pray, "The Lord is our Shepherd." In life, in death, in the hell of death-dark ravines and in the fearful presence of enemies, Jesus, the Good Shepherd is with us. A good spiritual practice when Easter has passed, is to contemplate and pray about and talk with someone about why God is pursuing you. To love you, yes. But why else is God pursuing you? What will you do with that love? What work [for God's Kingdom] does God have for you to do?

The King James version of Psalm 23 ends with the comforting words, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." Translated from the Hebrew this verse is, "I will return to the house of the Lord for many days." This is a psalm, a prayer, of trust... so we trust that God is our Good Shepherd now, and who will be our dwelling place, our oasis, forever.

On the front of the bulletin is an image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He carries a sheep across His shoulders and His staff is in His hand. We remember that Jesus said, "My sheep listen to My voice. I know them and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of My hand." As we begin a time of prayer let's consider how we listen to God's voice, how we follow Jesus, and how we trust that we are held, safely, in His hand. And then... what we do... what does Jesus call us to do with our overflowing cups of love and blessings? Amen.