

Green Pastures, Still Waters, and Enemies

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Texts: Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

Our reading from Psalm 23 this morning is one that stimulates our senses in some relatively major ways. Whether you are very familiar with this passage or less so, it is hard not to get drawn in with your full self. Can you picture the green pastures and that good shepherd? Rolling hills and a quiet boy tending to a little lamb. Or, can you feel the cool refreshment of the still waters? A quick dip in the pool or in the calm lake on a hot, lazy summer day? Perhaps the words about comfort and alleviation of fear are what overwhelm and enfold you. You can feel your shoulders drop and you find yourself at ease. Maybe your stomach is more concerned about the tables being prepared for pizza Sunday, or a cup overflowing with coffee, tea, lemonade, or whatever beverage suits your fancy. Goodness, mercy, all my days, my whole life long. How beautiful and wonderful, right?

Now, I don't want to snuff out the candle of delight and peace that stirs when reading this Psalm, but I also don't want us to jump to conclusions in the imagery and feelings of abundance. I mean after all if that's all there was to say I could wrap up this sermon now, put a bow on it, and call it good!

But I think there is an invitation here to consider the painful, uncomfortable, and even challenging realities that are held within this passage.

"I shall not want." While this might sound like we get to be greedy, spoiled children who get everything they ask for, I'm not so sure that is what is intended here. For the psalmist writes "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." So that doesn't mean that we get picturesque greenery and days at the spa, but rather that we will be led according to the ways of the Good Shepherd, the One who knows our true needs, and who will provide to meet them.

Consider Israel in the wilderness. While they complained and desired to be back as slaves in Egypt even, they had what was needed, they were not in want, though they

might have felt otherwise at times. The Lord provided for them, and led them according to his purposes of love for God's own people. For a little scientific illustration, even our bodies can play tricks on us at times. Feelings of hunger often arise out of a true signal of thirst. We think we want food, but our body is really desiring water. Sometimes we can be so focused on our immediate wants that we lose sight of a lifelong plan. Lavish abundance of top-shelf provision, though we might think we want it, would not quench our thirst for the living water.

As the Psalm continues, we are met with darkest valleys and talk of evil. This kind of debunks the ultra-pleasant saccharine sweet imagery as well because that is not what the psalmist is alluding to here. By naming the very existence of the darkest valleys, we recognize that life is not all rainbows and sunshine. Loss, distress, and suffering are all very real, and very present in our lives. Shipwrecks, earthquakes, and war plague our world and affect the daily existence of individual persons and whole nations. Bullying, murder, and disputes isolate individuals and pull families and communities apart. Cancer, depression, and death do not discriminate. No one of us is immune to tragedy and struggle over the course of our lives, and to pretend otherwise is a denial of our present reality.

And let's not forget to address this troubling bit about enemies. One pleasant image that comes to mind as we get to verse 5, "you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" tends to include the changed "enemy" sitting with us. We might imagine that our "enemies" are invited to eat at our table, in the comfort that belongs to us because we are the anointed ones. We have the abundance and thus we get to be generous and invite our enemies to our table. But the table doesn't belong to us, it belongs to God.

And what if instead of the pleasant view of becoming friends with our enemies somewhere down the line in our lives and welcoming them in, we are sent out in the midst of our enemies? What if the anointing with oil is a blessing with a charge to go out into the dark wilderness from our center in God, where we will quite literally be in the presence of our enemies? And who are our enemies anyways? What comes to mind when you hear that word? Do you get images of Jedi knights and Sith lords? Or Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner? Perhaps we think of those who believe differently than

we do, or come from a different background, or those who are instrumental in taking the lives of the ones we love, or threatening to disrupt our way of living, or taking away the ideals and things that we hold dear.

One of my ministers growing up regularly used what I'll call a catch phrase during the congregational prayer toward the end of our worship services. Whether he knew it or not, I tracked this phrase and took it as an indication that our time of prayer was just about over. As soon as he uttered something about "those we call allies and those we label enemies," I would straighten up in the pew, clear my throat, and prepare to pray the Lord's prayer, or to sing the upcoming hymn. However, as I reflect on this phrase, "those we call allies and those we label enemies," I think he was onto something. We are the ones who put this label of "enemy" on other people, on the sheep from another flock, if you will. But what would it look like to peel off those labels and seek to live into the goodness and mercy of being one flock, one people, God's people; to seek to see the other as God sees them; to see every person as a child of God?

And, friends, I wonder if we might ask "what" rather than "who" our enemies are. Ponder with me for a moment the possibility that our enemies are not people, but are death and the brokenness of Sin. The brokenness that abides in the dark valleys of our world, whose presence is inescapable in our present reality, in its entirety. Might this also alter and inform how we view those whom we struggle to love or view as beloved of God? The table the Lord prepares for us is one that is located in this world, in our here and now.

Yet, we also live in the reality that Sin and death were conquered on the cross. That through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, death does not have the final say! This is good news! It is in this very triumph that we, as a people who have the knowledge of a Risen Lord are able to take heart in the comforting words of goodness and mercy...all the days of our lives. We recognize that yes, the green pastures of our planet are polluted, we know all too well the weight of wilderness journeys, and we feel the sting from the enemies in this world. But through the smog, burden, and pain comes the love of our Lord who is ever present. God does not leave us to fend for ourselves, but holds us closely and protects us with a rod, and God guides us with a staff.

And so it is, that one way we can read this Psalm is not as some picturesque foreign or future place we desire to venture to, but actually as a very real depiction of our day-to-day lives. In taking seriously the challenging and disheartening aspects and realities presented in this Psalm, we maintain a fuller picture of life as it is.

Furthermore, we are able to more fully take comfort in the words of the psalmist and live knowing that God goes with us, and even before us. The Good Shepherd leads us along the path; we cannot go anywhere God has not gone before us and will not go with us. God entered into the dark wilderness, our wilderness, into suffering and death, so that we might know God and God's love. The Good Shepherd seeks us out, wherever we may be, and welcomes us into the fold. The Good Shepherd has lovingly laid down his life for us, and will take it up again for us. Thanks be to God!