

Texts: Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Today, the 4th Sunday of Easter, is called “Good Shepherd” Sunday. We recite the 23rd Psalm and we hear Jesus talk about how his sheep hear his voice because he himself is the Good Shepherd.

Psalm 23 – pull out one of the Bibles from the pew rack (you might need to share) and let’s turn to Psalm 23. First, let’s read it again together...

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

**⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.**

**⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**

**⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.**

How many of you know this Psalm by heart, or most of it? At almost every funeral I have led or attended, this psalm is spoken, often at the graveside. I’ve begun to notice that some folks recite it along with the pastor. It has been a source of comfort for generations and generations.

But if we only speak this psalm at funerals, if it is only a psalm of comfort at death, then we don’t allow it to reside where we live. We don’t give it a place in the rest of our

lives. That's what I want to do this morning. I want to look more closely at the phrases where the poet speaks in the first person.

First: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. *I shall not want.* We live in a place and a time where so many of the messages that we receive through advertising, the messages we receive through social media and even the messages of our common social discourse are set up to convince us that we are wanting. We are conditioned to want. Unless you use such-and-such a product, unless you live such-and-such a lifestyle, unless you look and act in such-and-such a way, you are found wanting. It's insidious. Who can you trust? No one but yourself. In contrast to all those messages, Psalm 23 becomes a manifesto.

When we say "I shall not want," along with the poet who wrote this psalm, we challenge all those messages that tell us how inadequate we are. It's not easy to resist those voices that want to tell us that we are the center of our own personal world. But here is the voice of one who reminds us that God has provided and continues to provide. God has given us the gift of life itself; the gift of community with each other and with all of creation. God feeds and shelters and leads and cherishes each one of you. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." This psalms call you to live in that deep trust, not just at the end of your life, but all through your life.

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil." *I fear no evil.* Every single presidential candidate wants you to live in fear. Fear the banks. Fear the immigrants. Fear for your job. Fear that someone is going to take away your constitutional rights. Fear that someone is going to raise your taxes. The terrorists who have carried bombs into public places in Brussels and Istanbul and the Ivory Coast and

Mumbai and Boston and Paris – they also want you to live in fear. They want you to fear for your life. So what does it mean to say these words: “I fear no evil?” Even in that darkest hour, even on the worst day, God does not bring evil. God walks beside you, showing you the right path, giving you rest and stillness, even in the midst of the chaos and the violence that seems to permeate our society. God is our safety. God is our refuge. God is our strength and our song.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...my cup overflows. Back when I was living in Durham, one of the local high schools mounted a production of “The Laramie Project.” It’s a play about the beating death of a young gay man named Matthew Shepard. The folks from Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas came to Durham to protest the play, and while they were in town, they chose several churches for their display of hatred as well. So on a Saturday evening, they were outside my home church, St. Paul’s, just as the evening service began. Let me tell you how disgusting their signs were and the vitriol that they shouted. We knew they were coming, and my pastor responded by putting a table outside on the church lawn, a table draped with a white tablecloth and set for a formal dinner. A table prepared in the presence of our enemies.

This is what God has done for you: God has prepared a feast of the finest food and the finest drink and God invites you to sit down and eat. God invites you to the fragrance of healing oil poured out over your head. God invites you to an overflowing cup of abundance. All of it offered in the safety of God’s care. When we are willing to trust the presence of the One who is our safety, we cannot be so easily manipulated by fear and hatred. When God brings us safely into the presence of our enemies, perhaps the next step is to invite them to sit down at the table alongside us.

Finally, “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” Jesus promised his disciples that he was going to prepare places for them in his father’s house of many mansions. Jesus reminded his disciples that they would dwell in him as he would dwell in them. At the empty tomb, the angel announced that “He is going ahead of you. There you will see him, just as he told you.” Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God dwells in your heart and you dwell in God’s heart. The house of the Lord is not a physical place. To dwell in the house of the Lord is to live in trust and security that God is with you every second of every minute of every hour of every day. That is the promise that this psalm makes. That is a promise that you can hold onto.

So let’s read the psalm once again together... “The Lord is my shepherd...

The next time you are at a funeral and the pastor reads this psalm, remember that it is a psalm not just of death, but of life. It is a psalm of life that began when your life began, it is psalm of the life you live right now, and it will continue when you make that step from this life into eternal life. It is a psalm of promise that in both life and death we belong to God, our true safety, our true shepherd.