

For Weddings and a Funeral

Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, April 25, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastor Joseph Harvard tells this story about Psalm 23: A young couple was planning their wedding, and when they met with their pastor, they discussed the various scripture to be read in the marriage service. They said to the pastor, "We would like you to read and preach a homily on the 23rd Psalm." The pastor was surprised, saying, "I'll be glad to do that, but that's usually used for funerals or memorial services. Why do you want the 23rd Psalm at your wedding?" They said, "We are a little anxious about getting married. We know it's not going to be easy to make our life together work. We are committed to each other, and we want it to happen, but we want to know the Lord is our shepherd who will go with us, even when we walk through the difficult valleys ahead."

Just hearing the couple's words makes me think their union will be a success.

In March, while teaching a class at our Wednesday evening sup-n-study, I asked folks to come the following week armed with their favorite Bible passage. I told them they were not permitted to come back with Psalm 23. I know that many people when asked to name their favorite verses in the Bible might say Psalm 23. But I would not let my class off the hook so easily. I'm not implying Psalm 23 has no value. It's just that it is so familiar. It is read frequently at funeral services, and annually on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, plus a few other times scattered across our 3-year lectionary cycle. That means we have a comfort level with it, many of us being able to recite the King James version from memory. But our familiarity with Psalm 23 means we may no longer experience its power and the radical declaration the psalmist makes in it.

That young engaged couple was wise beyond their dating years. They told the pastor, "...we want to know the Lord is our shepherd who will go with us, even when we walk through the difficult valleys ahead." They heard that psalm, not just as meaningful words for the end of life, when bodies age or sicken and then die. They heard that psalm as proclaiming God's presence in the fullness of their whole life together. The ups and downs, the daily challenges, the occasional boredom, the sublime joy, the little victories, and the broken dreams that course through everyone's life. It may indeed be a psalm of comfort and peace in that moment when we take our last breath. But it reminds us God is shepherding us in every **other** moment as well. And that is a radical statement.

I mentioned in a past sermon that I have a photo from our first vacation at Disney World that is merely a picture of the back of my husband. I took that photo

because Randy, goal-oriented person that he is, was always in the lead. And while it would be nice to stroll leisurely hand-in-hand through Disney World, the truth is you don't get very far doing so. Randy was the tallest in our family. He could see far ahead and determine how best to weave through the crowds to the place we wanted to be. That is shepherding, and the Psalmist describes that kind of leading in the Psalm: *He leads me beside still waters...he leads me in right paths for his name's sake.* Randy led our family through the congestion of Disney World, around strollers and scooters and people looking at their maps wondering where they were and where they should go next. We were grateful for his shepherding.

But do not suppose that the person who was at the end of the Easton line—that would be *moi*—was not also doing a necessary shepherding. That first Disney World vacation was at a time when our three children were still smaller than I, their legs still much shorter. So I followed behind, holding little Rebecca's hand, sometimes quickly pursuing Sarah and Matthew if they began to angle off in a different direction, and then, once Randy led us to the place we were to be—the line for an attraction or show or restaurant—well, then, I gathered in those three children, right behind Randy. I was shepherding, too. Randy and I had the same goal in our different types of shepherding, whether we realized it or not.

I tell you this because of the final verse of Psalm 23: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* The Hebrew word for "follow" here is actually the word "pursue." Goodness and mercy—the things only God can give, and the very things we need most in this life—are pursuing us. Goodness and mercy are giving **our** selfishness, **our** lack of love, **our** refusal to walk in God's ways a real run for their money, says the Psalmist. And eventually, goodness and mercy will catch up to us and gather us in to the good and merciful presence and kingdom of God. So God is not only leading the way, with us trotting along behind, but God is also behind us, encouraging us forward, reining us in, steering us gently or not-so-gently so we stay on the path, and drawing us closer to him. He is ahead of us, yet he is ever at our heels. We are positively enveloped by our shepherd God. Whether we realize it or not. Whether we appreciate it or not.

And what about the radical "stuff" in between the first and last verses of Psalm 23? There's *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.* To claim that we shall not want is to counter what the world constantly tells us—that we do want this or that or those things, and that we suffer a profound lack without them. Virtually every thing bombarding our eyes and ears today speaks this language: You want this. You need it. You are not whole or "with it" or normal if you don't have it. And when you and I are so bent on trying to get what it is we've been told we lack and are convinced we now want, we fail to notice if our neighbor is truly lacking, truly needy, truly wanting. But, if we begin to trust that with God as our shepherd, we shall not want, we will have all we really need, then we'll begin to share with one another—share ourselves and share what God has given us—and, lo and behold there will be no lack, no neediness, no want, and the Psalmist's words will be true for everyone. So what happens when that engaged couple trusts God to be there in their marriage and will provide all they need for their union? Well, they'll be more

devoted to their partner, desiring the other's wellbeing, not simply expecting their own particular needs to be met constantly in a one-sided relationship. And what happens when a congregation like Trinity trusts God is shepherding us, and giving us all we need to minister in this place? We'll reach out to and take care of one another when a brother or a sister suffers. And each of us will offer the best each of us has in talent and energy and resources and time for the good of all, and out of gratitude to God. We are being called by this Shepherd into a radical new kind of community.

Yet it's not a community to which we escape, hiding from the world. You know, a sheep or lamb was vulnerable to predators around them. So are we. It would be wonderful to be hidden away in safety, wonderful if the church was this haven tucked away from the troubles of the world. But the psalm writer doesn't suggest that at all. Instead, the psalm writer tells us God shepherds us and provides for us even as we journey in the midst of real danger: *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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

This morning a table has been prepared for us by our Lord Jesus. He told his disciples that whenever they gathered together in his name, they ought to share in this meal, and share in his life given in bread and wine. God's taken this simple tablecloth, the plate and cups, the bread and wine and he's given it all to us in the presence of our enemies. Do you understand? Because we've brought in with us here the dark valleys we've been journeying through, we've come bearing our enemies: Our heartache and our disappointments—even those disappointments we have with each other in this place, the worries that kept us awake last night, the sins we committed under cover of darkness, the memories of failures we've experienced, the nagging thought we're not worthy, the terrible fear we're not loved. These are our enemies. And we come here bearing these enemies with us—enemies that insist God cannot possibly help us or lead us or make new life in us. But God dares to set a table for you and me, even as these enemies surround us. And at this table God confronts these enemies, and refutes the enemies' arguments by reminding us that we are his children whom he passionately loves. Remember how that psalm ends? That God's goodness and mercy are busy pursuing us all the days of our life...and will at last catch us.

Okay, so maybe Psalm 23 is my favorite Bible passage. Or ought to be. All I know is each one of us needs a shepherd. Who better than our God? **AMEN.**

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