



## “Simply Lutheran: Only Grace”

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Saturday and Sunday, October 14-15, 2017

All Services

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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

What do you want? How often are we asked that question? As we call a help desk or as we sit in a restaurant, what do you want? We live in a consumer society. We live in society that is based on us wanting. We call it consumer demand and economists measure it carefully and companies try to encourage it.

We see and hear a couple thousand advertisements every day on TV, radio, internet, billboards, and ubiquitous logos. They want you to want their products. Our whole economy, our whole society is based on it. Some companies are really good at it. They convince you that you want it. One of the best is Apple. Every year there is new iPhone and people line up at stores to get one. There are only so many in the store; and if you want one, you need to stand in line. You, personally, may not want the latest iPhone or technical wizardry, but that is the thing that makes me want. I am very tempted by technological gadgets. Your wants may be different – the latest fashion, the latest new car, a kitchen appliance. We are conditioned to want. All day long the message is that you want this.

They create scarcity in order to motivate us. There are only so many so if you want to get one you need to be in line. Call right now operators are standing by. Scarcity moves us. It is like bread, milk and toilet paper disappearing right before a snow storm. What if we do not have enough?

What do you want? The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is the one. It is the one Psalm that seems to be the one that resonates with us. If you have memorized a Psalm it is probably this one. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. There is such comfort for us in this Psalm that we often hear it at funerals, at the time of death, or impending death. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. Yet it is the appointed Psalm for this day. No funeral, so it is worth a deeper look.

The Psalm has an interesting structure. If you read it in Hebrew.... By the way it is good to learn Hebrew according to Dr. Schramm, my Hebrew instructor, since it is the language that God speaks in the Bible. So, meeting God it might be good to know God's language. But I digress. Why Hebrew? Because there are 26 words, an expression, and then 26 more words. The expression at the heart of this Psalm is that “for you are with me” or if you prefer the King James version, “thou art with me.” The center of this Psalm is the affirmation that “God is with us.” We from our Christian view of the

Gospels hear Emanuel, God with us. Jesus Christ, God with us. At the heart of this Psalm is what is at the heart of our faith that God is with us in the person of Christ, God made flesh. God the Holy Spirit who dwells with us.

What is the experience that we have in this relationship with God? I shall not be in want. **Is that a statement of God's promise to us or is it our promise to God?** I shall not be in want. The answer is yes to both.

The Psalm goes on to say what God will provide. What does God promise? Green pastures, prepare a table. God promises that we will be fed. Still waters and overflowing cup. God promises that our thirst will be satisfied. Right pathways, the absence of fear and anointing. God promises safety.

Watch, too, the language in the Psalm. In the first three verses, the Lord is spoken of in third person. The Lord is my Shepherd, the Lord makes me lie down. But after the center, "for you are with me," the language is second person. Your rod and staff, you prepare a table, you anoint me. The realization that the Lord is with the Psalmist, that the relationship becomes personal with the God who is with us. God, who is with us, in this deeply personal relationship watches over us and provides for us. God provides abundance.

Contrast that with the message of our culture, which is that there is not enough. We live in scarcity, we want. God says, "you shall not want." You live in abundance. God has given to us freely. The God who is with us has provided. Why does God do that? We are God's beloved children and God bestows on us freely the gifts of food and drink and safety, freely given, not earned, not deserved, or not even our right. It is the free undeserved love of God. It is what we call God's grace. It is the gift that our Lutheran expression offers in the Christian witness. That it is only God's grace, only grace, that saves us and sustains us.

The very thing that moved Luther's heart and opened up God's word was Paul's letter to the Romans. Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; (Romans 5:1-2 NRS) this unmerited love of God. We center our being on "God with us," Jesus Christ, through faith we experience the grace of God.

How is it that we live our lives with God at the center, at the center of this Psalm, at the center of our being with God as our shepherd? I shall not want. We live in ways that strengthen our faith in God, our relationship with God. What are these ways? The ways that we have practiced for thousands of years. Christian disciplines: prayer, Bible study, meditation, silence, worship, service, fasting and generosity. These Christian disciplines help strengthen our relationship with God.

There was monk who was meeting with his spiritual director. He had been faithful in his practice of spiritual disciplines. As they talked, the spiritual director said that a close encounter with God, an intense experience of God's presence, was often an accident. I, too, know this from my own experience. Some of those encounters happened here in my time of formation in this congregation. But the young man of faith turned to his

spiritual director and said, "if encounters with God are accidental, then why do I need to do these spiritual disciplines?" His spiritual director looked at him and said because they make you accident prone.

A spiritual life is a life with God at the center that we may encounter the living God. Our response to God's generosity is for us to follow the spiritual discipline of being generous. Luther said it this way, "if God has given you wealth, give thanks to God, and see that you make right use of it." The response to abundance is not to say that I can't give, I don't have enough, I want. That is the story of scarcity, the story of the culture in which we are immersed.

We live in the abundance of the knowledge that the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Our generosity is a spiritual gift that flows out of God's gifts. It was Jesus who said, "Where our treasures are there our hearts will be also." Did you hear that? It is not that our treasure follows our heart. It is the opposite. Our hearts follow our treasures. The spiritual discipline of generosity changes our hearts and moves us closer to God. It makes us accident prone. It turns us to God. It centers our life where the Psalmist calls us to be centered, God with us.

It is the same centering that we are about to experience when we come to the table. We will be fed with bread and wine from God's abundance and the promise will be fulfilled. God with us – this is my body, this is my blood. We celebrate at the table God has prepared for us.

All of us, including Connie and me, as members of this church have an opportunity to make a commitment from our treasures to move our hearts giving and living generously. It is not our dues, our portion of paying the light bill here, it is us living into the reality of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that in response to God's abundance for us, God's very presence at the center of our lives, that we have a chance to respond.

To place our time, our talents and our treasures where we want our hearts to be with God, who is with us, Emanuel. A God who through God's underserved grace has walked with us in all of life moments. Thanks be to God for grace alone that sets us into the presence of God. Amen.

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