

Written Copy: The Pasture our Shepherd Provides-Psalm 23 & Acts 2:42

4th Sunday in Easter

Sunday, May 3rd, 2020

Text: Psalm 23 and Acts 2:42

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 paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will 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 forever.

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers

Exegetical Statement

David uses the symbolism of the shepherd caring for his sheep to describe the loving care that the LORD provides for His people. In this world He provides places of comfort and rest, both physically and spiritually. He provides for all our needs of body and soul, restoring our soul from the damage of temptation, suffering, and sin. He walks with us and guides us through the difficult and scary times, even as we approach death. David switches to the symbolism of the King who welcomes his people to his table for banquet and feast and is powerful enough to protect them and allow them to enjoy this banquet even surrounded by our enemies. He provides these things for His Church as we gather in worship and praise as the Early Church did devoting themselves to the hearing of God's Word, the fellowship and building up of one another, the Sacrament of the Altar, and the liturgy and prayers. The LORD's goodness and mercy will never leave our side. He leads us and provides for us throughout our time in this world, leading us to His dwelling place in eternal life.

Focus Statement:

Christ is our Good Shepherd who is always providing the perfect pastures of physical and spiritual refreshment, even when it looks like we are in the Dark Valley. He has conquered all that would harm us in His death and resurrection. Through the Gospel that is given in the Means of Grace, and poured out upon us in Word and Sacrament Worship He keeps us safe and fed, guiding us through this world to His eternal pasture on the Last Day

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

As we deal with the feelings of isolation and fear brought on by COVID-19 we fail to see the work of our Good Shepherd and His hand leading and guiding. We see ourselves in the Valley of the Shadow of death and fail to see His green pastures follow us there too. We fail to recognize what He provides for us when we gather for worship

What the hearer should do as a result:

See His provision for us in a new light of faith, even during our time of isolation that can feel like the Valley of the Shadow of death. Gain a new perspective and appreciation for what He provides us in the Means of Grace and in Word and Sacrament Worship

Subject Sentence: Christ Always provides Green Pastures for us Sheep

Introduction: COVID-19 Pasture

As I was meditating on Psalm 23 and its opening lines: **(Psalm 23:1-2) 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,**” I was gazing at the view from the back porch of the Parsonage. I was looking at the freshly mown lawn stretching out behind the Church building. Everything looked fresh and green. It was close to 70 degrees out and the sun was shining. It was a beautiful spring day, a lot like spring days I remember from last year. Except there was one big difference; there were no people out there enjoying it. It was Saturday, and on any given Saturday last year there would’ve been many kids out enjoying our playground. There would’ve been neighbors walking their pets. Perhaps even a family using our pavilion for a picnic. So where are they all? They are Sheltering at Home, of course.

As I gazed and contemplated how strange things are right now, I thought about the contrast between the opening of the Psalm and verse 4 with its line reading “the valley of the shadow of death”. It’s as if COVID-19 and the fear of contracting it are that valley, and it’s out there hiding, even in the midst of the beauty and peace of our property. That green meadow looks ever so inviting, but there’s danger lurking in the trees. A danger that can run out and grab you when you least expect it because its invisible, you cannot see it coming. It’s there laying a trap for you, waiting for anyone foolish enough to venture out of their homes lured by the beauty of the day. It will grab hold of you and cast you headlong into that valley of deep shadow, where you may never make it out alive.

Obviously, I watch too many Twilight Zone shows and read too much Stephen King. But beyond the gentle sarcasm lies some truth that we should all be mindful of. I’m not saying we should throw caution to the wind and not take the necessary precautions to keep this Virus from spreading. I’m not saying that you should stop assessing your situation in regard to your age and your other health issues. You should take those things into account and act accordingly. Follow the guidelines that The CDC suggests. Give due diligence to the Executive Orders of our government which has been given to us as a gift from God. But at the same time don’t let fear take control and rule your life. Don’t let fear whisper in your ear that the Valley of the Shadow of Death is lurking about your house and is out to get you. Or is ready to seep under your door and take you away. Don’t let fear obscure your view of your Lord and Savior who is still ruling over all things, and is doing so for you.

Most of you would agree that Psalm 23 is a psalm of great comfort. It is regularly read or sung at funerals for the promise it provides, both for the recently departed, and we who are grieving their passing. But how might it speak comfort and assurance to us as we Shelter at Home, dealing with fears concerning the Virus attacking us as well as our loved ones.? How can it speak words of comfort and hope to us when it’s time to leave our isolation and join back in with society? When COVID-19 makes us feel as if we live permanently in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, we may wonder where is the green pasture and still water our Lord promises? Psalm 23 and our First Reading from Acts today have the answer.

Christ as the Fulfillment for us of Psalm 23

Let's contemplate Psalm 23 through the lens of Jesus proclamation in **John 10:11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.**" Jesus Christ fulfills the picture of the loving Shepherd that this Psalm poetically describes. He is the One who provides so all our needs are met, and even some of our wants.

Our lives before COVID-19 could easily be seen as green pastures beside still waters, perfect places to lie down and enjoy our lives as Americans who rarely "need" anything. As sinful self-centered people we lack the ability to judge our wants versus our needs. We want things that are not good for us. Left up to ourselves we would choose pasture that to our eyes looked green, and lush, and good for the body and soul. But actually, it would mean death. Without His guidance there would be danger lurking in the trees, and the unseen Valley of Death stalking us. In our desire to make our lives the best pasture money can buy we are drawn away from the one who provides the pasture we need. We were and still are so blessed that most of us confuse needs with wants. But now, living with the threat of the Virus, what has happened to your green pasture, your still waters? Are you lying down in faithful comfort? Or are you instead cowering at the entrance to the Dark Valley? When the fear takes control what has happened to your Good Shepherd?

When we worship the gifts instead of the Provider, we forget just how blessed we really are. We forget that there is still amazing beauty to be seen, even in this fallen, dying world. Just like the view yesterday morning showed me. When we trust that Jesus is our Good Shepherd who lovingly provides what is most needful and good for us, body and soul, through the eyes of faith we see that truly we lack nothing in this world, physically or spiritually. When we see our lives through His eyes, we "shall not want".

That Dark Valley is not something we as sheep wander into and our shepherd has to go rescue us from. The Dark Valley is part and parcel of living in a fallen world. Revelation warns us that during the time between Christ's Ascension and His return of the Last Day one of the things that will afflict various parts of the world is plague and death. Welcome to the partial fulfillment of Scripture.

But here is where we can find comfort in even in our COVID-19 Valley of the Shadow of Death. Who is walking with us? Our Good Shepherd. Our Mighty King, our Lord and Savior. In verse 4 the perspective changes: The Psalm begins by talking about the Shepherd in the third person- "He makes me lie down..." But in verse 4 the perspective turns to the 2nd person: "You are with me." David is emphasizing how close by our Good Shepherd is when we are afraid. He is right here beside you, protecting you. He has His weapon of defense: His rod, which was like a heavy club to bash in the skull of anything that might try to reach out of the darkness and grab you. And His staff that helps guide us along the right way to go so that we don't wander off and get lost in the darkness.

That club that defends us from evil is actually the death and resurrection of our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. It was by His sacrifice in our place that the evil forces of sin, death, and the devil are defeated. We have nothing to fear in that dark valley because all that would harm us has been neutralized. Your mighty King who is stronger than your sin, stronger than death, stronger than the devil, walks right beside you. The night is like daytime to Him. Fear no evil.

He walks beside you through the gift of Baptism. His Spirit dwells with you wherever you are and whatever you are going through in this world. He works to keep you on the paths of righteousness, the path of obedience to God's will, and all for the sake of the name that we have been baptized into: the Triune God. And when we stray from that path, the staff of our Lord is at work. It is His words of Law as He points out how we stray in disobedience, and calls us back to His sheepfold through repentance. Through our faith in Christ, even when the world around us appears to be the Valley of the Shadow of Death, we are actually resting in green pastures beside still waters, because our Lord Jesus Christ never stops providing for our needs of body and soul.

The Pasture He Provides us in Divine Worship

Here David turns from the symbolic picture of the Good Shepherd to the King providing a sumptuous feast. Notice that the banqueting table follows the entrance into the Dark Valley, not before it, and not after we leave it. We do not have to leave that Valley to enjoy it. He brings it right there to us in the midst of that Valley, even as we are surrounded by our enemies. Now this picture would have especially stood out to the people of David's day. One would never enjoy such a banquet with enemies lurking. Just as soldiers would never eat, drink, and be merry on the front lines. But with Jesus as our King we have nothing to worry about. Our enemies may smirk, sneer, and growl at us. They may want to attack us. Yet we are as safe from them as if we were eating in the banquet hall of a large fortress. No one can touch us or harm us with Christ protecting us. Even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, or in the Valley of the Shadow of COVID-19, we enjoy all that Christ has to offer us. Our heads are anointed with oil: a word picture describing how guests were welcomed and honored. And the overflowing cup describes the unending grace, mercy, love, and peace that Christ has to give. All of our sins of doubt and fear are forgiven. All of God's gifts are being poured out upon us. There is no shortage of what Christ has in store for us.

While this banqueting table is symbolic of the gifts of grace and mercy that abound in our lives as Jesus' saved and redeemed people, it is best seen in His gift of the Lord's Supper. We gather around His table, welcomed as His honored guests, called by faith through the Gospel. As His honored guests we feast on the gift of His true body and blood in the bread and wine. It may be only a small wafer and a splash of wine in the cup, but it contains all of Christ that we could ever need. We receive the body and blood of the eternal Almighty God Himself. And we receive Him not once but every time we gather as His Church.

It is here, when we gather in the Divine Worship Service that He provides in a manner like no other place the gifts that Psalm 23 extol. It is here that we enjoy the refreshment of the Gospel that is like lush green grass and cool still waters. It is here that His paths of righteousness are made known to us. It is here that we find His real presence and receive the comfort of it even in those dark valleys. It is here we partake of that banquet that we call “a foretaste of the feast to come.” Over and over again the Holy Spirit is at work through the means of grace to restore your soul.

That’s why the Early Church was so devoted to public worship from the start. Act 2:42 describes the life of all those who were baptized after Peter’s Pentecost Sermon. **(Acts 2:42) And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.** They gathered as the assembled body of believers called to faith through the Gospel and baptism. They gathered to hear the apostle’s teaching, which is the words and instructions from Christ Himself. We gather here for the same thing that is given through our Scripture Readings, and the sermon that proclaims Law and Gospel. They gathered in the special fellowship that those who share the Holy Spirit have. The fellowship of love and care for one another, forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven us. The fellowship that moves us to build one another up as we confess our faith and praise our Lord and Savior together. And they devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread that was and is the Lord’s Supper, just as we will again too someday in the near future. And they prayed, speaking back to God the words that He has given to them in the Scriptures, which is what our liturgy is all about. They prayed to the Lord for each other, and the concerns and cares of those around them, just as we do in the Prayers of the Church. Our Lord Jesus Christ gathers us here for worship and makes it a place of spiritual green pastures and still waters. Our quiet resting place where He restores our soul and prepares us to head back out into the Dark Valleys that fill this fallen world.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has changed our lives. It has made us see that even in our abundance the Valley of the Shadow of Death is lurking. But we need not fear. Our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ is leading us. He is the light that dispels the darkness. He is our protection against any and all evil. His Spirit is with you and at work to restore your soul, whether you are worshiping on site with us or at home. You are protected from your worst enemies: sin, death, and the devil. **(Psalm 23:6a) Surely goodness and mercy shall follow (you) all the days of (your) life,**” because the Holy Spirit dwells in you, and Christ has promised never to leave you or forsake you. He is leading you through the Dark Valley. And where are you headed? **(Psalm 23:6b) You shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.** Join with us now in praising and thanking our Good Shepherd for the green pasture, still water and refreshments for the soul He has provided for you in His Word. And as the danger from the Virus wanes, and your confidence level grows, we will be here waiting for you. When the time is right for you to return to worship, come and join us in receiving His gifts that are poured out here in His Real Presence. Join us in praising His name as we proclaim our love

for Him. Until that time rest easy and without fear. The Lord is with you. And because He is with you, you are resting in His green pastures, beside His still waters. Wherever you are, He is at work restoring your soul through the gift of faith. Amen