

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for May 3, 2020 ~ The Fourth Sunday of Easter

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The Twenty-Third Psalm is one of the most well-known chapters in the Bible. Countless people have memorized it, usually in the King James Version.

Many of us recall Sunday-school posters of this favorite psalm superimposed on beautiful painted pictures of Jesus on a grassy hillside, with a lamb over his shoulders, rescuing it from danger. Many children still get great comfort from the image of the kind and gentle Jesus who cares for all God's creatures. This is the Jesus who will stay with a child through a dark night filled with terrors: alligators under the bed and monsters in the closet. This is the Jesus who stays with adults too, through nights of weeping, and loneliness, and worry, and despair.

And in those times of danger, anxiety, and grief, many people turn to the Twenty-Third Psalm for comfort. At the bedside of people facing surgery or serious illness, reciting the psalm brings peace and hopefulness. At funerals, it evokes the kind and loving presence of the God who promises an eternal dwelling place in the house of the Lord.

Perhaps some of us are experiencing something like that during this pandemic or have experienced those emotions in another time of crisis or tragedy. As I was preparing this sermon, I looked back at sermon files for Good Shepherd Sunday, the Fourth Sunday of Easter and discovered that I have preached about the Good Shepherd in the context of seriously disturbing national or international tragedies eight times in the last twenty years:

- The L.A. Riots – April 29, 1992
- The violent end of the Branch Davidian Siege in Waco, Texas April 19, 1993
- The truck bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, April 19, 1995
- The Columbine High School Shooting, April 20, 1999
- In 2003, our military had invaded Iraq less than a month before (March 19, 2003)
- The Virginia Tech Shootings on April 16, 2007
- The Deepwater Horizon Explosion resulting in the largest oil spill in history, April 20, 2010
- The Boston Marathon Bombing, April 15, 2013
- The West Fertilizer Company Explosion: April 17, 2013
- And now, the COVID-19 Pandemic.

How do we make sense of a world in which things like this happen? How do we make sense of a world in which our beloved elders and bright, innocent, promising young lives are tragically and suddenly lost? How do we begin to understand a world where people in America, China, Australia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and a thousand other places die regularly and senselessly? How do we make sense of a world where a virus 1/20 the size of a lice is killing people and collapsing economies? Natural disaster and human evil take their tolls on us and our struggle to understand add to insult to injury.

Perhaps the people crowding around Jesus in the Portico of Solomon one day were asking similar questions. They asked Jesus, who had just healed a man born blind, "Are you the Messiah?" They wanted to know if he would be the new hero who would drive out the Roman invader? Would the nation be free and independent once more?

They wanted a clear and decisive answer. Instead, he was cryptic and evasive. The people wanted him to talk about weapons and strategies; instead, he talked about sheep. To their demand that he assume the leadership for which they had been hoping, he answered with a claim of leadership so astounding that many picked up stones to kill him on the spot: he claims to be one with God the Father.

This is no gentle, clear-eyed Jesus on a green, rolling hillside; this is a fierce, uncompromising Jesus, who refuses to meet any earthly expectations, whose frame of reference is so far removed from that of the people around him that it is a wonder he escaped with his life. Indeed, John tells us that the next time Jesus showed his face in Jerusalem, the chief priests schemed to have him crucified.

How do we reconcile the gentle, kind shepherd Jesus, the one who would go anywhere and risk anything to save even the smallest lamb, with the Jesus who provoked his enemies to violence? And how does this Jesus have anything to do with the worries and dangers of our lives? How can our faith in Jesus help us through a tragedy like the one in Boston? What can the gentle shepherd do to help?

The wonderful thing about Psalm 23 is just how realistic it is about the darkness of life. Perhaps the picture we get of the Good Shepherd from art and music and childhood memories is an image of pure light and sweetness. But the psalm itself knows darkness and fear. Like the writer of the psalm, many Christians have traveled through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. They too have known the threat of the unknown. And yet many have also known the comfort of God's presence, walking alongside them through that dark valley. Many people have felt the sweetness of Jesus' love surrounding and enfolding them in the most difficult moments of their lives. Many have experienced transcendent holiness and light in the darkest of times.

People who spend much time with those who are ill or bereaved know what kind of help brings true comfort. Comfort does not come from assurances that everything will be all right or from platitudes that try to explain why everything that happens is God's will. Comfort comes from the simple presence of companions who sit with us in our darkest hours, to walk through the darkness with us, to help us make the darkness holy, and to rejoice with us when small glimmers of light finally begin to shine.

And at the heart of it, that is what our Christian faith can tell us. It tells us that our Lord and Savior, the great hero who liberates us, is not the God of light alone. Jesus is sovereign over the darkness too, because he too has been enfolded by darkness. Like us, he has grieved over the senseless waste and tragedy of life. Like us, he has agonized over those who suffer. As all of us will eventually, he has entered into the darkness of death. And with all of us, he promises to walk that road so that we do not have to walk it alone. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

The ultimate truth of our Christian faith, the truth we remember this Easter season and every Sunday as we celebrate the Lord's Resurrection, is that our Shepherd leads us out of death into life, out of darkness into light. The One who was crucified and who rose again is the same One who promises to redeem the world, to relieve its suffering, to restore it to wholeness, to inaugurate a new creation. The risen Christ is the sign of the life that God promises to all of us: life transformed, life redeemed, life restored, life abundant, life joyous and blessed and eternal.