

Ash Wednesday-February 14, 2024

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Psalm 23

"My Shepherd, Everyday"

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Many of us understand what it means to not be in want. Many of us today were able to make choices of what we would eat today. Few of us were without food. We have closets of clothes to coordinate what we would wear today. Few of us carry all our clothes in a bag wherever we go. We likely had options of which vehicle to drive to get to where we needed to be today. Few of us had to wonder how we were going to pay the fare for a bus ride to get to work. Most of us even say that we are blessed because we are not in want of just about anything. If we need it, we can go and get it. "I shall not want" can be a confusing translation. It doesn't mean that you and I won't have any desires to have things. "I shall not want" is better understood to mean that we will have all that we need. I think it is safe to say that most of us gathered tonight are quite satisfied with what we have and if we are honest with ourselves there is little that we are lacking.

It is the first part of the first verse of this familiar Psalm that we can easily forget. Since we feel that there is little more that we need and because we are not in want, we fail to remember where all the things we have come from in the first place. We forgot that all that we have is because the Lord is My Shepherd. And it is because of the Good Shepherd that we are not in want.

The first half of Psalm 23 paints a tranquil scene. You have seen paintings that portray Jesus as the Good Shepherd whose flock is following close by his side. Quite often Jesus is holding a lamb that you can imagine that he has rescued and now is again safe in his arms. Jesus and his flock of obedient sheep are surrounded by a pasture of lush plentiful grass. The sheep can sit down anywhere, and their next meal is within reach of the stretch of their necks. As soon as the sheep have had their fill of grass and have rested, they do not have to search for water to drink. There is a still clear stream of water close by to quench each lamb's thirst.

Late last fall, I thought about this scene that is described in the beginning of Psalm 23 when we went on vacation. We spent our first evening less than 100 miles from home in the Watertown City Park. It was a peaceful campsite with shade trees and was surrounded by neatly mowed green grass and without any wind during our stay, Lake Kampeska as calm as glass as the moon reflected on it. We again had a wonderful campsite even closer to the water at the Indian Creek State Campground near Mobridge overlooking the Missouri River. In each of these places, it seemed we had all that we needed.

I don't know of many artists who have painted scenes that portray the rest of Psalm 23. David, who wrote this Psalm understood that not all days are peaceful and calm. David felt what it was like to be seated at a table and eating with his enemies. After David was given success by killing Goliath, Saul became jealous and was constantly looking for an opportunity to harm him and to put him to death. I know of many people who have experienced difficult days by working with people whose jealousy turns to hate and they will do whatever they can to unjustly discredit their good work and destroy their reputation. I don't know of any artistic renditions of Psalm 23 of people surrounding their loved one's bed in a hospice care facility. Would you think of Psalm 23 and the Good Shepherd when the news describes another tragic event?

But these are also days when the Lord is our Shepherd. The Lord does not ride in on his powerful white horse and snatch you away from the enemies in your life and make you lie down in green pastures and beside still

waters again. Instead, the Lord sets a plate for you in the very presence of your enemies. The Lord doesn't even destroy your enemies with his justice so that you can eat in peace. The Lord anoints your head with oil, just as he anointed David to be a shepherd over his chosen people. The Lord chooses David and stays with him even when he wanders off into places of temptation and danger and when he faced the greatest enemy that each of us will face one day. Death itself.

We are not chosen by the Lord as David was by anointing our heads with oil. We are chosen by receiving three splashes of water on our foreheads in the waters of baptism. And once claimed in these baptismal waters, our Lord does not prevent enemies from appearing in our lives, but we will never be alone as when we face these enemies. We will not even be afraid of them, because the Lord is my shepherd, and it is his rod and staff that protect us.

You can be sure you that have heard the gospel by the pronouns that are used when you hear the good news. When you receive the body and blood of Jesus, the bread and wine are not given for US, they are given for YOU. Nor is there no sharing of water when you are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are chosen when it is your head that gets wet, and your ears hear that you are his child.

In this beloved Psalm, it is not just about any shepherd who is a protector and provider, and it is not because you have seen the shepherd wrap his arms around other lambs. Psalm 23 is a statement of your faith about the Lord who is MY shepherd. You know the Lord is your shepherd because you have felt his presence on days of peace and calm. You know the Lord is your shepherd because without his providing, you would be in want. And you know the Lord is your shepherd when you have felt his protection on days when you otherwise would fear your worst enemies.

Each of our lives are made up of seasons of both. Joy and peace and fear and sadness. Our good shepherd has promised to be our shepherd every day. And just when you and I think that the good news couldn't get any better, your good shepherd has promised to pursue you every day of your life so that you can spend eternity with him. Amen