

Easter 4 - Sunday, May 8, 2022

Psalm 23 John 10:22-30

Paul Sartison, Epiphany Lutheran Church, Winnipeg

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...” I imagine that a lot of us could go on from there, by memory, maybe in one or two or three languages, without even needing to think about it.

I sang it once when I was younger and on a backpacking trip in the Rockies. We'd set out from last night's camp and a kilometre or two along the trail I remembered that I'd forgotten my jacket back at the campsite. So I ran back along mountain paths, through some woods and around blind corners. We knew that a mother grizzly and her cubs – Happy Mother's Day! - had been spotted in the area the day before, so as I ran that trail I sang this Psalm. I sang it really loud, especially that part about “Even when I walk through the gloomiest valley, or the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” And I felt a little safer. Just a little. And I found my jacket.

It's that familiar. Even at that young age it was etched in my bones and brought me some comfort when I was scared. My fears that day were small. There are much bigger fears out there, and people finally being evacuated from that steel plant in Mariupol have known much bigger fears and a much deeper valley of the shadow of death than that. Someone waiting in the waiting room while their beloved is in surgery knows a kind of fear that needs more comfort and courage than I needed that day. But still – no matter the size of the fear, the psalm speaks courage.

We all need something like that sometimes. That simple word that when we are most afraid we are not alone.

Or a simple word that when we know so much fear or judgement or struggle, God's goodness and mercy are following us, pursuing us...wrapping us up in

goodness and mercy...teaching us too show mercy and compassion wherever we go. "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me, pursue me, all the days of my life."

We need a simple word like that too. That simple word that when kindness and mercy seem to be so rare, the goodness and mercy of God are always chasing us down, and catching up with a world that needs to know mercy and kindness and learn mercy and kindness.

Or we need a simple word like this: that God the shepherd sets a feast for me, for us, in the presence of enemies. In a world so broken and divided between enemies at war, or in courtrooms or schoolyards or homes or legislatures or streets, God the shepherd sets a feast, a table of hospitality and abundance where people eat in the presence of the ones they have called enemies, and maybe those very enemies sit down together, brought together by a shepherd who makes peace.

Maybe this is what God the shepherd looks like: Not marching ahead with a shepherd's staff, but running after us, running into the world with a backpack full of goodness and mercy, with a backpack full of food and drink for all and sitting us down together, making friends out of enemies, making justice where there was oppression, making peace where there was war. And God the shepherd keeps on moving, keeps on with us, keeps on pursuing us and the world with mercy and goodness.

Thousands of years after this psalm was first spoken and heard, Jesus talked about himself as a shepherd. It's like the shepherd of Psalm 23 took on flesh and lived among us.

We met Jesus, that shepherd, in that reading from John today, and the people and the religious leaders are pressing him for some clear answers about who he is

and what his plans are. He doesn't answer with any details, but he answers like that shepherd who never leaves the sheep to wander alone: "I know who my sheep are, and they hear my voice, and I'll never lose them, and no one will take them from me."

Psalm 23 has six verses. I suppose if there were a seventh it might be God the shepherd saying, "And just to be clear, I will never lose my sheep. No one will snatch them from my hand. I will never lose my sheep."

We will know fear, and the world will keep needing kindness and goodness and mercy, and the way ahead won't always be clear and sometimes it might seem like you or I or we are in a valley where it's just shadows and haze...where do we go, what do we do? Yet even when we have to step away from clear waters and peaceful times and walk into scary places and muddled lives, the promise pursues us wherever we go, like goodness and mercy that follow us: "I will never lose my sheep." And we're set free to live and work and try to sort out the troubles and change what we can and care for the people around us, and all the while we have this voice ringing in our ears that reminds us that whatever we might do, whether it's all clear or not clear at all, Jesus will not lose his sheep, his people, or this world that he has been given.

And Jesus doesn't keep the sheep by being powerful. He doesn't save the world or anyone in it by fighting off the enemy with a big stick. The shepherd keeps the sheep and gives life to the world by becoming a lamb, and giving up his own life. Only after that walk in death's shadow is Christ raised up again, and then we say it like this: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And nothing is a lost cause. No sheep is a lost cause, no world is a lost cause, nothing will be lost...for Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

It's not complicated theology. It's just a promise. If you think the world is going nowhere but down, the shepherd who becomes a lamb says, "No, I will not lose the world. Nothing is a lost cause." If I think that I'm a lost cause, or you think you are, the shepherd who becomes a lamb says, "No, I won't lose anyone who's been given to me. There are no lost causes."

And when the fear looms large, or there are too many hard questions, or we're just tired out from trying not to lose our way, this lamb who is also a shepherd does lead us to some quiet and some stillness. Even if it's only for a short time. Then this lamb who is a shepherd spreads a feast, and sets for us a table where no one is an enemy. And we are fed, and the goodness and mercy of the lamb chases us into the world and into our day to day lives with a promise that rings in our ears again: "I won't lose anyone given to me. I won't lose you. I won't lose this world."

For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

AMEN.