

“Made To Lie Down”

The 23rd Psalm

The Lord *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.

God maketh me to lie down in green pastures,

God leadeth me beside the still water,

God restoreth my soul:

God leadeth me in the paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil

for thou art with me

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me

in the presence of mine enemies;

thou anointest my head with oil,

my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy

shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

“Made To Lie Down”

Psalm 23

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I.

Befitting the Lenten season, last week I preached a sermon about SUFFERING. First from the point of view of the Psalmist who suffered alone, then from the perspective of the Apostle Paul who encourages us to suffer together. This week, that same Psalmist offers us solace from such suffering in a way that, if we are being honest, seems outside of Paul’s wheelhouse. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.* Consider this first line. Though I have no real basis for saying so, it seems to me if Paul were the author he would have phrased it differently. *We shall not want, the Lord is our shepherd.*

II.

I don’t know about you, but beyond our admitted familiarity with this psalm, these two alternative sentence constructions seem to arise from very different perspectives. While they are theologically synonymous, one creates a vastly different feeling in my soul than the other. For our hypothetical Paul, it would seem more of an intellectual exercise. For the Psalmist, though, the statement is almost a cathartic release or, even, a final yielding. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.* You can almost *feel* the exhalation of a breath which has been held too long; *wheeeeew.*

As if after so many dark nights of the soul the Psalmist arrives at a final conclusion and, having exhausted every other option and answer, at last alights on the only remaining possibility. Though it might have been a long journey to arrive at such a place, the truth of it is, as the Psalmist well knows (along with you and I) this was the very place from which we first began the journey. Standing here now, however, is somehow different, isn’t it? And vastly so. We’ve *earned* it. Which is different than *deserving* it, though that might be true as well. Such thinking comes later, however. For now, we are just relieved to be back here in this place, together, with the utter awareness of all the changes which have taken place in us, both the good and the bad, on our long journey back to God. It is here we, now, that we make our home and no longer need to want.

III.

God maketh me to lie down in green pastures, God leadeth me beside the still waters. I have read the 23rd Psalm, out loud, 100s of times over the span of my ministry. Typically at funeral services or at times of acute need. Regardless of circumstance, though, I always read it with the same intonation: *God MAKETH me to lie down...*

The particularity of the Psalmist word choice should give us pause. The bible is full of “shalls” and “shall nots.” There is no lack and, seemingly, no end to what God would have us do or not to do as free will is the means by which we journey. However, I cannot recollect any other instance of God *making* us do something. The gift of green pastures and still waters isn’t an option or an opportunity. The burden of discernment and decision making is lifted from us. Having arrived home with God, our shepherd, the struggle, the search, the yearning is *done*. Over and against the protestations of our doubts and our denial of our own virtues, God, nevertheless, *makes* us to lie down.

IV.

God restoreth my soul; God leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Today we resurrect what had been, until COVID, a yearly Lenten service of healing & wholeness. I will admit, as the one administering the rite, I have a certain uneasiness about the admonition found in James 5:14: *Is any sick among you? Let them call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.*

Yes, it is most certainly true that I have no compunction about celebrating Christ’s atonement in the sharing of the bread and cup of Communion, or of proclaiming the promise of new life in Christ at Baptism. However, anointing people with oil, laying on hands and praying over them for healing and wholeness? This seems to be a whole *other* thing. Which, to be perfectly honest, feels like something of a risk. What becomes of faith when such earnestly sought-after healing does not arrive?

V.

I remember the first such service we held many years ago, Leigh O’Connor came forward. He was battling cancer, quite probably caused by exposure to Agent Orange while serving as a soldier in Viet Nam. What a moment that was, with him sitting in the front pew of the sanctuary with such quiet

strength and courage. Elders rested hands of comfort upon his shoulders and I anointed him with oil in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Three times making the sign of the cross on his forehead.

Some months later I thought of little else when I sat with him by his bedside in the days leading up to his death and, with teary eyes and a heavy heart, read to him the words of the 23rd Psalm. It was then I realized that healing and wholeness assumes many forms, as *some* manifestation of the miraculous always occurs in simply asking it of God. This day hands have been placed on heads to offer blessing that we might rest in the quiet strength and courage which comes from our asking God to restore us, and to restore the soul of our nation and world.

VI.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me, thy rod and they staff they comfort me. These are dark and difficult days to be sure my sisters and brothers, a valley of shadows so utterly surreal as to be previously unimaginable. However, the Psalmist has clearly walked this way before us and has left a signpost, a cairn, a message to guide our passage. Leave behind, always, the evil that is fear. Carry with you, only, the rod of scripture's guidance, discipline, and correction, along with the staff of God's sustaining and protective presence. These are the only comforts we will need along the way of our journey to the far side of this valley. For we have embarked not on an aimless ramble but, rather, a pilgrimage of purpose toward that which lies ahead, toward that in which we placed our hope.

VII.

Though preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies, though anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over. We now arrive at a place of bounty, feasting, and blessing; and, most surprisingly, safety. A table has been set for us in celebration of our return. Which, in contrast to the valley of shadows from which we have emerged, seems almost prodigal. It is exuberant, lavish, and unrestrained.

Even more startling, though, is that all of this occurs in close proximity to those who, and that which, might do us harm. Which is a particularly poignant notion in a nation which seems to be divided and delighting in seeking conflict at every turn. Certainly with our perceived enemies, but also

with our closest neighbors and those who we have always considered to be our friends. Yet, so pervasive and complete is the shepherd's power to protect that no threat, however near, can deny us the blessings which God has set out before us to enjoy. Light the candles, strike up the band, the celebration has begun. We are home in the peace of God's presence.

XIII.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the lord forever. At last we come to the end of the 23rd Psalm. In all the bible, only a very small handful of verses can match the force with which the wheel of the words hits the road of our lives. And there is no other which is more elegant. If there was just one bible verse to put on a bumpersticker to encapsulate and represent the crux our faith, this would surely be it.

I have found it a very curious thing that in all the years I have been here as the pastor of this church (or my first two churches for that matter) no one has ever asked me what I think is a fairly obvious question: "Mike, why did you (of all people?) become a minister?" A very good question indeed.

IX.

It is my earnest prayer that even throughout whatever ordeal you now suffer, or *will* suffer, each of you might come to believe that goodness and mercy follow *you* each day and that you, too, shall dwell in the house of the Lord now and always. That you believe this begrudgingly or joyously, it matters not. Just believe and just keep the faith, It is *your* faith and it is you who must keep it. Others can certainly help, though, so please allow us to do so. I hope that in hearing or reading this sermon you have been made to lie down, if only for a short while. You are loved. Amen.

X.

Certainly, I've always heard and felt a call to ministry. Not the voice of God speaking from a bushing bush kind of thing, but more a quiet and constant whisper echoing through all of my life. I also knew, vocationally, I wanted a career where I had both the opportunity and capability to truly help others in ways which were real and effective. In this regard, the role of pastor is simply unsurpassable. Admittedly, though, these reasons, in and of themselves, were not sufficient so as to cause me to become a minister. Moreover, they

certainly would not have been enough to sustain me through the ordeal necessary for me (especially me) to become a minister (those stories for another time). No, I had to earn it; mostly the hard way.

XI.

Like the description in last week's scripture reading from the 88th Psalm of the suffering the Psalmist undergoes, I had to wrestle with myself through too many dark nights of the soul to ultimately arrive at a final conclusion. Having exhausted every other option and answer (some exhilarating, many chilling) I at last alighted, came to rest, on the only remaining possibility: the very place from which I began, though, now, quite different.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the lord forever. Over the span of 30 some years, it has become absolutely evident to me that the life of faith is not something one can choose to have. It is something one finally admits they need to have and, so, accepts it. Perhaps begrudgingly at first but later, hopefully, with the greatest of joy.

XII.

It is my earnest prayer that even throughout whatever ordeal you now suffer, or *will* suffer, each of you might come to believe that goodness and mercy follow *you* each day and that you, too, shall dwell in the house of the Lord now and always. That you believe this begrudgingly or joyously, it matters not. Just believe and just keep the faith, It is *your* faith and it is you who must keep it, Others can certainly help, though, so please allow us to do so. I hope that in hearing or reading this sermon you have been made to lie down, if only for a short while. You are loved. Amen.