

April 2, 2017

Lesson 5: Psalm 23

God As Our Shepherd

Context:

The scripture lesson we read today is probably one of the famous passages in the Bible. In the Old Testament, when asked to name a particular Psalm, this is the one that most people default to when explaining their knowledge. Everyone knows that the 23 Psalm is the one that you want said if you are at a funeral or in a time of trouble.

Like the Psalms that express the wide array of emotions, this gives God an image. God is a shepherd one who guides his sheep through meadows and protects them through the dark valleys that may be full of rocky cliffs and dangerous wolves. The rod and staff are used to prod them along and also knock anything out of the way that blocks the path.

Once the image of the shepherd is used, the Psalmist translates it to daily life. The person is able to eat with their enemies because God is with them and they are bathed in oil so that they feel so blessed as they follow the Lord. That feeling of assurance and protection leads to joy and comfort that God will always be with them wherever they may go.

Psalms like these were ancient poetry that orally would have been recited and passed down through the generations. They would have been like prayers that are murmured over and over again as they were passed down through the family. Wherever you were in ancient times, you would be able to look at the devotion of a shepherd to his sheep and think about how God does the same with humans.

Application:

This Psalm still speaks to us today. Whatever funeral I attend or preside over, usually the family will ask that a Psalm be read responsively. And nine times out of ten, this will be the one the family chooses for the congregation to read responsively or for me to say in the quiet moments when there are tears or sobs and people look to the liturgy to speak in the midst of death.

But I have also used this Psalm in forms of pastoral care and in tender moments where I too realize that God is with me even in the crazy places that life will take us. In realizing the words of the Psalm, we are given assurance that God will be with us no matter what we may face in this life. Even when the valley seems darkest, God is there.

Whenever I was a Hospice Chaplain, I learned a lot about the one thing that rich and poor, young and old, religious and non-religious might fear or wonder about; the great equalizer, death. No matter how much we take care of our bodies, how much money we possess, what level of society we come from, or what medicines we take, we will all die. Sometimes it is sooner than we would like and other times it is a release from the pain that has been there through a lingering illness or just old age.

But wherever one may be when it comes to realizing their mortality, there is still grief and even an element of fear. And it's not just about physical death. Sometimes it comes with changes in our lives. All things in this world are finite from our own physical bodies to the jobs and seasons of life we find ourselves in at times. We may experience a major life transition, a move, or even the end of relationships that have served their purpose. In the United Methodist Church we know that this is appointment season, a time where some pastors may be sent to other congregations and congregations may lose their

pastor. It can be a fearful time as people wonder and feel nervous about the future of their congregation and who they may receive as a pastor. People may go through a time of mourning and a time where they wonder what they will do when they say bye to someone they deeply love.

In times of both physical death and times of change, I think this Psalm can help us look forward to the future. Even though we go through uncertainty and moments of anxiety, we are reminded that our Lord is with us. We are not alone and God is with us each step of the way. When it comes to death, we are reminded that God is with us both as we live and as we die. On his deathbed John Wesley was recorded to say: "The best of all, God is with us." As we are there for those who may find themselves in Hospice or close to leaving this earth, may we remember to just sit there with them and remember that God is there even in the last breath.

When it comes to times of change, this Psalm gives us the hope that God is with us in times of transition, even in a time in our polity when people are moving and going. We are reminded that God is at work, even in the places that feel unnerving or scary. And more importantly our job is to trust God, the Bishop, and the Cabinet and to know that the Spirit is at work in who is appointed where. Just as David was a young ruddy boy picked out of a long line of older brothers to be the King of Israel, God can use all sorts of people to do amazing things. As we go through this season of potential changes and others that may follow, may we know that God may leading us into places and new opportunities to participate in the Kingdom of God. May we always remember that God is our shepherd who leads us through all sorts of things and will never forsake us.

Rev. Evan Hunter Pugh

Verbena - Pleasant Hill UMC Charge

Verbena, AL

P.O. Box 7

Verbena, AL 36091

verbenaumc@gmail.org