

Psalm 23:1-6, 2014, 4th Lent

As I think back over the years I have been preaching I can only think of one time when I may have preached on Psalm 23.

It was probably at a service for Laura's National Guard unit during a Drill Weekend while I was a seminary student.

None-the-less, I have shied away from preaching on this psalm and as I began my preparation for this week I discovered why.

First off, this psalm really speaks for itself and spiritually needs little explanation.

The imagery of grace in the grazing herd as the good shepherd watches over his flock,
and with a gentle hand leads and guides them
through the most difficult and dangerous of times,
the darkest places
instills a sense of peace and certainty of God's
presence and never ending care.

Also, this psalm is so well known, and has provided so much comfort to so many in their darkest hours.

People have their own memories of when and how this psalm brought peace to them,
and restored their faith, even their life.

There is this fear that I would say something that would diminish or destroy the meaning of this psalm for someone who has experienced it's healing power.

Each of you who have ever attended a funeral have heard this psalm. I can't remember a funeral without it because of the comfort it provides, the peace it brings,

because this beautiful poem brings God into that very moment, into that difficulty, crisis, that dark hour.

Psalm 23, as you know, is a poem, and like all poetry has structure.

This poem really has three sections, each one carrying a different theme.

The first is god's provision found in verse 1.

The second is the abundance of God's provision in verse 2.

And the third is restoration found in verse 3.

These themes are then repeated in verses 4-6, and are the reason this psalm speaks to people in such a heart felt way.

This psalm is not a psalm to be reserved for the crisis in life, but can be used daily to speak to the little challenges of life as well because of these themes.

Everyday life or times of real crisis, God's presence is profound in the words of this Psalm 23.

God is not some distant being or force that doles out just with you need but comes to be with you.

God's caring for you cannot be separated from His own being. The way God cares for you is through His presence in your life.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for you are with me."

The psalmist in the words "Even though" I walk through the valley..."

reminds us that life is a journey and there will be times when death will overshadow the possibilities of life, the joys, the blessings, the good things, the hope that sustains us today and tomorrow.

It reminds you that “even though...” evil may come there is no reason to fear.

You don't have to be afraid of what evil may bring into your life because the God who created you is with you and will see you through.

God's presence doesn't change your circumstance or situation, but He does change you.

I think of the situations that terrorize us and cause great fear.

A cancer diagnosis, a broken relationship that you are not sure can be repaired,
the loss of a job, home or loved one, military service of a loved one.

The fear of not being accepted by others because of who you are in terms of your race,
appearance, ethnic origin, sexuality,
the language you speak or are not able to speak, the disability you have.

I think about this loss of the sense of peace we long for, the loss of a sense of safety and certainty of life that comes with tragedy;
unexpected death, car accident, house fire, 911, war.

I think about the loss of hope and joy of life.

Psalm 23 doesn't say that God changes those things, But he does change you.

I shall fear no evil for you are with me Lord, and I know you have power over all these things that hinder the abundant life you give me,

And with that rod and staff you will protect and defend me from all evil.

“The Lord is my shepherd...He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters. Lord you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

Here is the proclamation of the abundance of God you can count on throughout your lifetime.

In verses 2 and 4 we move from the imagery of a peaceful and tranquil life to the imagery of being surrounded by those who would deny you God's blessings and provision;

who would likely not only deny you, but take it for themselves

But even then God's provision is abundant. It exceeds not only what you need but goes so far as to provide for you as a king would be provided for.

The anointing of the head with oil is a rite that is reserved for kings and maybe God's prophets, and the psalmist knows this.

In fact, King David to whom this psalm is attributed would have been intimately familiar with the ritual.

This is how God provides for you; as if you were a king.

God provides you with a deeper and richer experience of His presence in the daily life you lead as well as in your journey through the valley of the shadow of death.

When I think about the funeral setting in which this psalm is used so frequently,

and the needs of those who have gathered to remember the deceased, to share their grief and sorrow, and to receive the consolation of God's love at that time

I think again of the broken hearts, the crying eyes, the loneliness that comes so quickly, the hole in the soul that creates such a void where there was once love, grace, joy and hope.

I can't help but envision how lives are restored through the comfort of others, the connection with family, and the words of this psalm.

"...he restores my soul...Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

You are restored, there is hope again, loneliness is swept aside in the presence of God, and in the ways God is present through others.

Mercy and goodness squashes the evil and fear that robs life, joy and peace,

and although the psalm says they will follow you all the days of your life, the more accurate Hebrew translation says that goodness and mercy will chase you down.

This goodness and mercy is relentless and will not allow you to escape its power to bring comfort, healing and hope into your life,

and not just today, but your whole life long.

There is hope again as your predicament, your life has met the divine promise of God's presence today,
and the promise of everlasting life with God, in His house forever.

Your soul has found the perpetual resting place in the presence of God.

The power of this psalm to bring peace and comfort rests in images of grace it offers.

There is no pressure to be better, to be more inventive, productive, stronger or more independent.

Psalm 23 allows you to rest in God's embrace, His care, His love, His grace,
his abundant provision, and there to be restored.

Thanks be to God for a poem like this that reminds us that we have a God like this.

Thanks be to God.

Amen