

July 18, 2021  
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

“At His Table Now”

Psalm 23

There is a psalm appointed for every Sunday in the church year. We don't read the psalm in the service every week. Maybe we should. But they never did in the church I grew up in back home so it simply hasn't been my practice.

The psalm assigned for this week is the very familiar and much beloved Psalm 23, probably chosen because its banquet imagery pairs really well with Jesus feeding the 5000 in our gospel reading. *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*

This psalm is chosen by grieving families in about 95 percent of the funerals I've done for obvious reasons. The valley of the shadow of death looms dark when you've lost a loved one and this is great hope, the assurance that Christ ushers the faithful through death to eternal life. However, because of this I think many of us may mistakenly receive the comfort and promise offered in this psalm as a future thing we look forward to experiencing when this mortal life reaches its end. But, please note, this psalm is written in the present tense.

This isn't a trick of translation. The original Hebrew of the psalm is present tense.

We read *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”* and that “shall” can go a few directions, maybe present, maybe future, maybe even a directive of how we should be thinking. But a better translation of the Hebrew would be, “The Lord is my Shepherd; I am lacking nothing”—straight up present tense.

But this kind of raises a question. If this lying down in green pastures and hanging out by the peaceful still waters is the present tense, why does life so often seem like one is in the middle of a mud slide headed toward a sink hole...filled with alligators? Well, that's an easy one to answer. In a fallen world the lives of broken people plagued by a sinful nature often look quite bleak and desperate. There is evil all over the place. There are riots in the cities, apartment complexes collapsing, forests burning, terrorists gaining ground and tyrannical governments not only enduring, but prospering. The world in which we live is a dumpster fire.

Yet, the Word in which we live restores our soul.

Martin Luther explained this psalm on the basis of Christ of course being the Good Shepherd, but all of the benefits bestowed in the Psalm as being the Word that teaches us, keeps us on the right path, comforts us and protects us. And this really works and this is really true.

In the midst of crises, tragedies and evil affliction, hearing, knowing and receiving the Gospel gives one peace and acceptance of the broken world, knowing that it is only transitory and passing away. The forgiveness of sins restores one's soul and assures peace with God. The friendship, adoption and claim of ownership we receive from the person of Jesus Christ Himself, the crucified and risen king seated at the right hand of the Father, gives us the confidence to endure all this world can throw at us. His rod and His staff do comfort us.

Our problem is that our present tense often absents the Shepherd from things. We have this tendency to think about me, mine and what I have to do to take care of these problems and combat these evils. Too often we obsess on that which is afflicting us, which leads us into doubt, fear and even despair. Yet when we bring Christ and His Word of promise into even the worst situations, it has the effect of giving us hope, even certain hope, that everything will be okay; that Yahweh our Shepherd is escorting us through safely according to plan.

*“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”* This truth is Gospel on a number of levels.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve always taken this as my enemies being the Lutheran evil triad—sin, death and the devil. These afflict me in the world, yet Christ in me and with me keeps them from reigning over me. I’ve always kind of pictured this passage as the darkness in some Bugs Bunny or Yosemite Sam cartoon. You know, where it’s dark but you can see all of the evil and scary eyes surrounding and staring at you from the darkness. But you need not worry because Jesus is with you and even in the midst of the darkness you dine in His presence, filled with His eternal blessings of forgiveness, life and salvation.

That picture is true for us as we sojourn through this fallen world plagued by our own sinful nature. But there is another way to view this.

*“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”* Jesus has been to the cross and through the grave. He has defeated all enemies—His and ours. So are those enemies really hanging out in the darkness ready to pounce? Not in Christ. The table Jesus has prepared is a victory banquet with all those enemies lying around it, bound and helpless! How’s that for a picture of comfort in Christ!

I suggest balancing both of those images as you come forward to the table He has prepared for you this morning. Yes, you’re coming from a week plagued by sin and affliction, the enemies seemingly endlessly rearing their heads throughout your days...but Jesus has brought you through that darkness here, to His table, to receive the very resurrected body and blood of the One who has vanquished those enemies and through this assures you they lie bound and powerless and can do you no eternal harm. *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”* Comfort and peace, no?

Yes it is. You can walk away forgiven, declared righteous, seen by God as holy. *“You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”*

But just as we make the mistake of thinking this psalm is a future-tense thing, don’t screw up in reverse and walk away thinking the Lord’s Table this morning then becomes a past-tense thing. The blessings received here today in Word and Sacrament travel out those doors with you because your Good Shepherd is with you, leading you as Lord and King, escorting you as friend and comforter, even correcting you as counselor and teacher. He is being what a shepherd is to you—Savior guarding you from harm and bringing you safely home.

*“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*

All of these blessing in Psalm 23 are true and delivered in the present, in the now, by Jesus in His enduring Gospel Word. Don’t allow your life to be absent this Word. Don’t relegate the Word to the future tense of “someday” or the past tense of “last Sunday.”

Jesus is your Lord always. Don’t resist His presence in any time of your life. He is present tense. Live your life in the “now” of His blessings of peace, restoration, contentment, declared righteousness, courage and the goodness and mercy that follows you now and all the

days of your life as you dwell now by faith, and one day by sight, in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.