

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EASTER**

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

The Psalms:ⁱ

Psalm 23. *Dominus regit me.*

THE LORD is my shepherd; * therefore can I lack nothing.

2 He shall feed me in a green pasture, * and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort.

3 He shall convert my soul, * and bring me forth in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake.

4 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 comfort me.

5 Thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of them that trouble me; * thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full.

6 Surely thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; * and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Psalm 146. *Lauda, anima mea.*

PRAISE the LORD, O my soul: while I live, will I praise the LORD; * yea, as long as I have any being, I will sing praises unto my God.

2 O put not your trust in princes, nor in any child of man; * for there is no help in them.

3 For when the breath of man goeth forth, he shall turn again to his earth, * and then all his thoughts perish.

4 Blessed is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, * and whose hope is in the LORD his God:

5 Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that therein is; * who keepeth his promise for ever;

6 Who helpeth them to right that suffer wrong; * who feedeth the hungry.

7 The LORD looseth men out of prison; * the LORD giveth sight to the blind.

8 The LORD helpeth them that are fallen; * the LORD careth for the righteous.

9 The LORD careth for the strangers; he defendeth the fatherless and widow: * as for the way of the ungodly, he turneth it upside down.

10 The LORD thy God, O Sion, shall be King for ever-more, * and throughout all generations.

The Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fortieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith [SETH] your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

“O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers. This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them. Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Twenty-Third Psalm: ““The Lord is my Shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.”^{iv}

Homily:

The twenty-third Psalm is among the most widely-known and best-loved literature in the western world. Most of us learned it in the King James version, but in any translation it is simple, it is beautiful, and it is profound.

I would like to invite you this morning to open your prayer book and look in some depth at this ancient hymn. It is on page 368.

Let’s begin in the middle: Verse 5. “Thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of them that trouble me.” Doesn’t that strike

you as strange? I mean, if the Lord is going to feed us, why doesn't He do it in some comfortable place where we can relax and enjoy it? Why prepare a meal in the presence of people who want to harm us? How can we enjoy our food when we are feeling threatened?

I don't really know the answer to that question, but I do know this. In the Bible the great scenes in which God feeds His people usually take place in hostile environments. God supplied the manna and the quails in the harshest part of the desert when the people emigrated from Egypt. He fed the prophet Elijah in the wilderness during a drought. Jesus fed the 5000 people in a remote and desolate place. The Last Supper took place in an atmosphere of anxiety and foreboding with the cross, the shadow of death, looming in the background. It is almost as if God wants us to go to unfriendly places to be nourished in the presence of threatening circumstances.

That is certainly true in a spiritual sense. Our souls are not usually nourished in pleasant and secure surroundings. Our souls are nourished in the harsh and hostile places where faith is tested.

It has been suggested that the 23rd Psalm describes an actual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, perhaps from Galilee. In the early stages, the journey is easy. The first three Verses talk about a reliable guide who leads the way through green pastures where there are plenty of springs and streams.

But when we get to Verse 4, we encounter evil and death and hostile people. This is a dangerous leg of the journey and the pilgrims have to pass through it in order to reach the Holy City. They do so with courage and faith, protected and disciplined by God's rod and staff. When they finally arrive at the temple, they are refreshed with oil and wine. They want to stay there forever and not have to go back home.

The pattern of this pilgrimage may fit the geography of the Holy Land but it is also the pattern of the spiritual journey of faith. That journey begins for most of us in childhood, where the grass is green, the water is calm, and a powerful figure protects us and supplies all our needs. The faith of childhood is simple, optimistic, and trusting. It's a

wonderful kind of faith to have. But as you grow older, you need and develop a more robust kind of faith.

Maturity brings awareness of evil and death. Innocence gives way before the harsh realities of life. Discipline emerges as a weapon and a tool. The rod and the staff become essential to our comfort and our survival. It is here in the valley of darkness that faith is challenged and ultimately strengthened.

At this point in the psalm the metaphor changes from the shepherd and his sheep to the host and his dinner guest. Here in the presence of people who don't like us we learn to depend upon God to nourish us, and we learn that he does that in the most difficult circumstances. We learn to be patient. We learn about duty and loyalty and companionship, and betrayal. We learn to distinguish between what is essential and what is merely of passing value in life.

As we pass through the valley of the shadow of death we begin to develop the character of Christ, which is what God intends for us. We develop courage by facing up to our fears. We learn our strengths and our weaknesses and what God can do with both of them when we offer them to him. This is the critical phase of the journey of faith. It is a time of formation and transformation in the image of Christ. Finally we reach the end of our journey of faith when we enter into glory: "Thou hast anointed my head with oil. My cup runneth over."

Moses anointed Aaron's head with oil when he designated him high priest of Israel. Samuel anointed David with oil when he named him King of Israel to succeed Saul. The phrase "The Lord's Anointed" came to refer to the Messiah, and you will recall that Jesus, before He went to the cross, was anointed with oil by a woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee. It is an oft-repeated theme that those who share the trials of Christ also share His victory and the honor that goes with it.

Anointing with oil served another purpose as well in ancient times and is still used for that purpose today in religious circles. Every year at Synod, the bishop blesses oil for anointing the sick as part of the healing process. So the final phase of the journey of faith brings healing as well

as status. Our cups overflow with celebratory wine as we become permanent residents in God's own household.

At that point we can look back and see that goodness and mercy were following us all along, even though at the time we did not see them. They were there in our youthful naïveté. They were there in the valley of darkness. They will be there at our reception into heaven. But we cannot see them when we look ahead because they always follow us. We see them in retrospect.

For me, and for the Church in general, we are somewhere in the middle of this pilgrimage. There was a time in the past when the world was friendly to Christians and the Church was respected. The grass was green. The water was calm. The paths were well defined. That is not where we are today.

Conclusion:

Today the Church is in the valley of darkness being fed by the Lord among people who do not like us. We are in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to Christians. It's not just in other countries where Moslems are killing our brothers and sisters, but it's also here in our own country where secular forces seek to drive us along with our symbols out of the public arena into the privacy of our homes and churches. This hostility we must endure before we come to the glory and joy that surely awaits us.

Wherever you may be on your personal journey of faith, whether at the beginning, or near the end, or somewhere in the middle, there is something in this psalm for you. No wonder it is so well-known and so much loved among people of faith.

“The Lord is my Shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.”

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER
xxii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 40:1-11 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. John 10:1-10 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Psalm 23:1 (MCV).*