

Rev. Zach Moffatt
Adams UMC
19th Sunday after Pentecost
October 20th, 2019

First Taste: Psalm 23

Psalm 23

Focus: The Lord is the great shepherd of life.

Function: The function of this sermon is to hear this psalm in a new light.

Will you pray with me and for me: Lord of all creation, we are your people. Shepherd us and guide us to lean on you in all moments of life. Open our eyes so we may see that you are with us—setting a table in our presence and welcoming all to feast with you and us. May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips be acceptable and pleasing in thy sight, oh God, our strength and our redeemer. Speak, Lord Jesus, for your servants are listening.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.

It should come to no one's surprise when I say that this text this morning is a tad bit different than the other stories we have covered in our *First Taste* sermon series. While Psalm 23 is still a story, it is not like any other story we have covered. And, we might say that last Sunday's story was different too—as one could argue it was the first story which was polished over, hiding its violence and disturbing qualities. However, Psalm 23 is radically different. This is the first and only time in our sermon series where we will cover a poem. And, Psalm 23 is a powerful poem. Psalm 23 is probably the most read and memorized psalm in the psalter. And, I guarantee that all of us have heard it one point or another. I guarantee that all of us could quote, if not all of it, at least some portion of this profoundly beautiful poem. Psalm 23's eloquence and charm, especially in the King James Version of the Bible is top notch. It stirs beauty and emotion in our souls, at least it does for me. And, if I asked you all, where in which you've heard this poem read, the first place most of you would say would be a funeral. Psalm 23 is almost a staple at any celebration of life—either being read by the pastor or officiant, or recited by the congregation, or read at the graveside, Psalm 23 makes its appearance. Its words bring comfort and compassion in times of sorrow and grief.

However, did you know that Psalm 23 isn't a Psalm of lament, but a Psalm of praise? In other words, it isn't a Psalm one would expect to be read if they just read through the Psalter without attending any funerals or memorial services. There are 150 Psalms in the Psalter and over half of them are Lament Psalms. Lament—meaning to cry out in anguish at hardship, pain, or injustice. Job lamented. Jesus lamented at the death of Lazarus. We even have an entire book of the Bible in the Old Testament called Lamentations. And, over half of the Psalms in the Psalter are Lament Psalms—Psalms where the poet and the community cry out to God longing for God's presence and God's love to be made manifest and felt in their lives. They are Psalms like Psalm 22—the Psalm that Jesus quoted as he was being crucified, "My God, my God, why

have you forsaken me?” Or Psalm 42 which opens up with, “As a deer longs for water so my soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” These are not the words of a pious person saying they dream of God daily—these are words of anguish from a person who is desperately trying to reconnect with the God of love and mercy. Or the words of Psalm 88 come to mind—the only Lament Psalm that doesn’t end with a word of hope—we are just left in the pit because there are moments in life where there is no light in that moment, where we feel like we are in a pit and there is no way out and that is okay. The Psalter teaches that it is okay to lament, to cry out, to wonder if God is there. But, Psalm 23 is not one of those Psalms is it? It doesn’t sound or even seem like a poem reserved for moments of sadness like a funeral, does it? It is a Psalm that sings praises to God. It tells a story of a person whose heart is so full that it bursts out in praise and adoration of the God who is always with them. It sings praises for who God is and what God has done.

And, who is God? God is the great shepherd who fills our lives with love and joy. God is the great shepherd who breathes new life into us and transforms our sin-bent and broken souls into souls that thirst and long for justice and love. God is the only necessity in our lives, for God is the great shepherd of life. And, friends, this is a radical notion. It was radical then and it is radical now. God is the only necessity in our lives. Nothing else matters but being in relationship with the creator of the universe. In a society that pushes greed and consumerism this psalm reminds us of a powerful message—all we need in life is God. All we need in life is a relationship with Lord of all creation, the Prince of Peace, the Mighty Counselor, the great shepherd of all life. God is the source of life, of love, of compassion, of hope. And God says that before we were anything else, before we are anything else, we are God’s. We are God’s children, stamped with God’s holy and beautiful image—and so is every other person on this planet—even our enemies, even those who have harmed us, even those we disagree with, even those we don’t like—we are all God’s children, claimed by the great shepherd of love who gives life to us all. And, when we realize that—we will realize that what truly matters in this life—sharing love to others in the name of God who is love itself.

And, what does this great shepherd do? This great shepherd walks with us, guides us, and leads us to the green pastures and the still waters of life. What beautiful imagery—what powerful imagery. But, the Psalmist isn’t naïve. The Psalmist knows that life is not always green pastures and still waters. There will be difficult moments, painful moments, dark moments in this life. And, then—even in the moments where it seems only darkness and pain resound, the Lord is with us. We know what the psalmist says, “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.” We all have been through the valley before—all of us know the sting of death, all of us know the pain of evil, all of us know the stark realities of pain and suffering. Some have lost children, others have buried parents, some have said goodbye to friends. Some of us have lost loved ones to suicide and others are battling depression and anxiety or know someone who is. Many of us have been with a loved one when they heard the diagnoses no one wants to hear. Some of us know how hard it is to keep working to make ends meet. Others know the stress of being the caretaker for a loved one who is sick. We all have been in the valley of utter darkness and we have all longed to feel the presence of God—and Psalm 23 reminds us of the greatest truth that we can

ever hear—in the midst of those moments God is forever and always with us. Goodness and faithfulness will pursue us all the days of our lives because God who is the great shepherd of life reaches out to us and calls us home into God’s holy and healing arms.

I love this Psalm. And, it deserves to be read time and time again—not just at funerals, for it reminds us that God is the great shepherd who never forsakes but walks with us and guides us through every mountain top and every valley. But, it does something even more profound. **Psalm 23 is about the abundance of God’s goodness, God’s mercy, God’s healing, God’s love.** And, this is seen in verse 5—where God prepares a table. A table in the presence of our enemies. As followers of Christ, this should bring a distinct vision to our minds—the Table of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is set before us, which we are invited to, but in which we do not own. The Psalmist doesn’t state that the enemies were forbidden from coming to the table—it is just set in the presence of them. The table isn’t closed off but open for the whole world to dine at. The table is God’s table—God is the host, God sets the table, the great shepherd of life welcomes all and calls us to do the same. God beckons and calls us to reach out our hands and welcome all to God’s table—the poor and the rich, the democrat and the republican, the documented and the undocumented, the housed and the unhoused, those who are gay and those who are straight, those who wear suits and those whose clothes are in tatters, those who believe and those who don’t—no one is turned away from coming to Table of God. God is with us, but we do not own God. The God who shepherds us to life also gives life to the whole world. The table at which we are hosted is one to which the whole world is invited to dine at. Because it at this table—in the presence of the great shepherd who breathes life and hosts all—it is at this table where we are anointed with God’s oil of love which heals, redeems, and leads to everlasting life in fullness of God’s glory and majesty.

Psalm 23 is so much more than just the Psalm we read at funerals. It is an affirmation that transforms our lives and our world. It reorients us and shows us what life under God’s house looks like. It reminds us that we are God’s and that our lives can be transformed by God’s presence. It shows us the power of God’s abundant mercy and love and shows us what this world can look like. It shows us what God’s kingdom looks like and invites us be agents of this kingdom now—even in the valleys of darkness. It invites us welcome the stranger, forgive our enemies, and invite all to the Table of God’s mercy and love. The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is your shepherd. The Lord is our shepherd in whom we lack nothing, in whom we are worth so much more than we imagine, in whom we are called good, in whom we are healed, in whom we are loved more than we will ever know.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.