

Pentecost 9, Year B

July 21, 2024

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 23

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

In this time in our world where so much is uncertain and so much gives us reason to fear, Psalm 23, our Psalm for today, allowed me some space and time this week to rest in the love of the Great Shepherd of the Sheep. And so, inspired by the 23rd Psalm, I want my sermon this morning to be a kind of prayer.

1 The Lord is my shepherd; *

I shall not be in want.

God, you are our fortress. You are our strength. We flee to you for shelter and safety and find it in the palm of your hand. You tend to your flock like a parent cares for her children. Slow to chide and swift to bless, your grace is our anchor in all of the storms of life.

And when one of us is lost, you do not abandon us. You seek us out until you find us. You do not consider it too high a risk to leave the flock to find us and bring us back to safety. You celebrate with joy that all have been returned to the fold and are safe and sound.

We shall not be in want, no, but that does not mean that our earthly journey will always be simple or safe. There are times it will be difficult to see the road ahead of us. And yet, even in those times, we shall not be in want for peace or love. We know that you became one of us in Jesus. You have walked the roads we walk, and you know what it is like to be in need. And from that knowing, you tell us that we shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *

and leads me beside still waters.

You still the storms that rage within us and lead us to places of quiet and calm. In the silence, you come to us. When we grow tired, like a lamb, you hoist us upon your shoulders. In you, we rest. Not just take a break, but deeply rest. We experience soul-quenching rest. Rest that can only be experienced by removing our shoes, feeling the blades of grass under our feet, and running through an open field with you.

And when, from all that running, we feel thirsty, you lead us next to a stream where our thirst is quenched. You might even encourage us to dip our toes in the cool water.

**3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.**

After resting in you, when hearts are brave again and arms are strong, you lead us by your Spirit to heal and bless the world. With a renewed mind, you show us the way ahead. You guide us in your ways to build up the Kingdom of God. You equip us for this work. In this world you have made, you have no hands on earth but ours, no feet but ours. It is through our eyes that you look compassion on the world. You remind us that rest is not something you want for us simply for the sake of rest. But rest is purposeful. It is through our rest in you that we are revived to accomplish all that you call us to do. It is after we rest that we can reach out to others and offer them rest.

**4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

We see your rod and staff, and we see symbols of your care and protection for us. We are comforted. We see the sunset in all of its beautiful hues of reds and pinks, and oranges, and we sense a peace that only you can give.

And, when the world darkens and we feel alone- when the beauty of the sunset is obscured by the darkness of loud storms that bring upon us thoughts of concern and worry, you remind us to trust. Just as you calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee with the words "Peace be still", so you protect us from the gales of life.

And even when our time on earth draws to a close, you give us a song. At the grave, we make our song Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

**5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.**

When it is time to eat and drink, you gather us to your table. You do not just feed us, you give yourself to us for spiritual food. In bread and wine, the work of human hands, you sustain our very lives. Even when we are afraid, that is precisely when you set the table and ring the dinner bell. You pull us out of ourselves and remind us of what is important- to be nourished and whole.

In the simple act of filling our cup, you show us your plan for us: abundance. For you don't just fill our cup, you fill it to overflowing. You don't just give us what we need for the journey, you give us more. You teach us that giving love and compassion and care to others does not leave us empty. Those things are inexhaustible because they come from you. You give yourself freely to us so that we can give ourselves freely to others.

**6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.**

And so, we trust. We trust in your goodness and mercy, that they will follow us, ground us, lay a foundation for our very lives. They pursue us and remind us to keep going. Keep working in the vineyard. Keep laying another brick upon the fortress of your Kingdom. You don't just invite us into this fortress, your house, for a visit or even just a meal, you move us in and give us the bedroom with the en suite and a view of the green pastures and still water.

May we find our rest and shelter in you, Great Shepherd of the Sheep, all the days of our lives.
Amen.