

FOR THOU ART WITH ME

Sermon, April 3, 2011

Texts: I Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23

When we recited "The Lord is my Shepherd," I'm sure many of you had memories rush to the surface. It may be the memory of the funeral of a loved one where this psalm was recited, something that is too recent a memory for too many of you. Some of you may recall Sunday school classes where this psalm was committed to memory. Maybe the words of this psalm tumbled out of your lips at a time of crisis and you just didn't know what else to do or say, perhaps you recited part or all of this Psalm at the bedside of one critically ill. This Psalm is arguably the most familiar and beloved of all the Scriptural passages, with the possible exception of the Lord's Prayer. Personally, I think it almost demands to be read in King James English, which renders this as a masterpiece of literary form; I know the language may sound a bit archaic, but honestly, other translation attempts just do not "do it" for me (*by the way, did you know 2011 is the 400th anniversary of the printing of the King James Version of the Bible? The translation commissioned seven years earlier by King James I of England was published in its entirety in 1611.*) Again, Psalm 23 has sung its way into more hearts than any other part of the Bible with the possible exception of the Lord's Prayer, and its message is not just for the funeral service. Its message of hope, comfort and assurance has been grasped by young and old alike. In all seasons of life, Psalm 23 is a tremendous personal affirmation of faith in the God who cares. It was written by the great King David ... who, if you'll remember, was a shepherd before he was anointed king.

Many of you know the background of today's Old Testament reading. The first king in Israel's history was King Saul. Saul wasn't one who sought power, but he came from a good family, was very popular, and was literally head and shoulders above all the other candidates. And he had great initial success in leadership. But as the years went by, it became clear Saul was turning out to be a disaster. He looked great on the outside, but like the massive old oak tree that used to be out in our back parking area, it was clear he was rotting away on the inside. It was some nine years ago we cut that massive, beautiful old tree down; the last straw for that tree was when it dropped a huge limb on our treasurer's windshield. It was a beautiful, even majestic, old tree, but it was fast becoming a hazard to anyone who came under its shadow, and had to be removed. The same with Saul. Among other things, Saul developed into something of an egomaniac who was paranoid of losing power, he consulted witches in matters of state, he became bereft of personal character, and basically led the people of Israel into a long, long drift from God ... in effect, he was becoming a hazard to all who came under his "shadow." God had finally had it with Saul, so He sent the old judge Samuel to the house of Jesse in the little town of Bethlehem, telling him, *"I have rejected Saul, and have chosen one of his Jesse's sons to be king."*

When Jesse's sons appeared before Samuel, the first one in line was Eliab; he was tall and the eldest son. Samuel took a look at him and thought, *"Surely this is the Lord's anointed."* But God told Samuel, *"You're looking on the outward appearances. People tend to do that. But I look on the heart. He is not the one."* Jesse then brings out his number two son, Abinadab. *"No,"* God says through Samuel. *"This isn't the one."* Then the number three son, Shammah. *"No."* Then out came the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh sons. Samuel kept saying, *"No." "No." "No." "No."* Those of you who remember your dating years ... or who may be in your dating years ... may know something about how this feels. You begin a relationship thinking, *"Surely this is the Lord's anointed,"* but somewhere in the course of the relationship ... sometimes it is somewhere in the course of the first date ... you realize, *"Nope, I'll have to keep looking."* (*Or, as I once saw on a greeting card, "Sometimes you have to kiss a few toads before you find your prince."*)

Think about this story from father Jesse's perspective. Seven of his sons, seven of his pride and joys, have been presented to God's prophet and rejected. How many times do we have to hear God's "no" before we finally hear a "yes?" Well, if you asked Jesse, he'd probably tell you the ratio is about seven "no's" to every "yes." Like Jesse, you may hear "no" a lot from God before He says "yes" to what you offer. But that might be because there is something you haven't yet offered to God, something that you may have been holding back. It may just be that we have to offer our *all* to God before we may hear His "Yes." Samuel then asks Jesse, *"Are all your sons here?"* Jesse replies, *"Well, there is the youngest of the family who is out watching the sheep."* And Samuel says, *"Go get him; we won't sit down to eat until he gets here."* When David walks in, still brushing the dirt of the pasture off his robe, God says to Samuel, *"Rise and anoint him; for he is the one."* And as David knelt before the old judge, Samuel laid his hands on David's head consecrating him to service and anointing him with oil. We are told from that moment on, the Spirit of the Lord came upon David with power. This is the same shepherd who went on to pen the words of the 23rd Psalm

Long before this psalm was used by the Christian church, it was a cherished hymn of the Jewish faith, and to grasp its real significance we need to recall their history with God. They were a people called Israel, a name which means, *"One who struggles with God."* At times, they struggled against God, and at times they struggled side by side with God, facing the challenges of life. They struggled for a home they were always trying to get into, hold onto, or get back to. They struggled for food and water, for peace and justice, and for a future. The Hebrew people longed

to stay by the “still waters,” they longed to have calm serenity in life. They longed to live with God, like sheep live with a shepherd, but their lives were hard. It was so hard they often had difficulty believing this Shepherd was leading them to green pastures, or that goodness and mercy would follow them all the days of their lives. So out of fear or dismay they frequently fled the shepherd and rushed down what they thought were easier paths, short-cuts toward happiness ... short cuts that always got them more lost, leading them into trouble and to laments for the salvation of God. So when they sang these Psalms in worship, they were telling their story: of being a people who would get scared and lose their way, and the high drama of a God who searches to find his lost sheep to lead them back to still waters, restoring their souls. Psalm 23 expresses the faith affirmation of those who have survived the churning, disruptive experiences of lost and frightened sheep.

Two weeks ago I was preparing dinner and a commercial on the kitchen TV caught my eye. Standing in a busy commuter subway station were a mother and her little boy; he looked about four or five years old. All of a sudden, the mother wasn't in the picture ... the boy was standing there alone, as many adults in a hurry hustled to and fro all around as they do in the busy-ness of a subway stop. The camera focused on his face, which was slowly disintegrating, melting, contorting into the look of a lonely, terrified little boy ... eyes growing wider, lips pouting and then quivering, then tears welling up, then the facial features fairly exploding in a torrent of sobbing and wailing in fear and terror ... and then this voice-over came on, “If he's this frightened when you are gone only for a minute, imagine how he would be if you were gone from his life forever?” It was an anti-smoking commercial, trying to get mothers to kick the habit. I'm telling you, it was a powerfully riveting and disturbing message that just wrenched my gut at a deep personal level! I'm still not sure how I feel about the appropriateness of it; after all, not all mothers leave their children due to personal unhealthy and/or bad habits, but it certainly got its message across.

Well, those who best understand this Psalm are those who, like that little lost “lamb” of a boy, have felt the fear and terror of being utterly alone. Have you ever been really afraid? I mean more than the “monsters under the bed” kind of frights; I mean the kind of fear that just terrifies you. Maybe it took a disease to scare you, or a phone call from an emergency room late at night, or a terrible argument with someone you really need in your life, or the sudden departure of a loved one you couldn't imagine living without. When you're really scared, it is hard to think about anything else. You don't know what to do, but you're sure you have to do something. We speak sometimes of being “scared stiff” or being “paralyzed with fear.” But my experience has been when people are fearful, they usually don't get scared stiff. Everything just seems to accelerate ... the days race by, we become unable to concentrate, we fret, we fidget, we sort of turn up the pace of life to level ten. We often don't know where we are going to run to or what we are going to try next, but we don't sit still. One prominent psychologist has written, *“Humans are the strangest of all of God's creatures, because they run fastest when they have lost their way.”* And that is how we often get into real trouble ... running when we are lost. It is then we make the worst mistakes with relationships, with family, with work, and certainly with God.

We sheep run because we have been frightened by some “wolf” ... a wolf that arrives in the form of that dreaded disease, that lost job, or that late night phone call. On the day the wolf comes, like frightened sheep, we run because we have more faith in the perceived reality of the wolf than we do in the Shepherd. But the wolf is not the problem. The fear is our problem. The problem is that we are not focused on the Shepherd. *“Thou art with me,”* David says in this Psalm. If you believe that, if you can see it, then you are not going to worry as much about the wolf. You don't have to run when you're afraid. You don't have to rush into bad decisions ... and trust me on this, just about all decisions made in fear are bad decisions. You can stop and be still and listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. The one has come to find the lost sheep of God. The Shepherd who does whatever it takes to come and rescue us, because that is what good shepherds do.

After rescuing us, the Good Shepherd then leads us in good paths, the right ways, *“the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.”* Often the right paths are not the easy ones. Sometimes they lead us away from the places where we are comfortable ... and the paths of righteousness eventually take all of us through a few dark valleys. But, David says, don't be afraid, because the Good Shepherd is with us in those dark and lonely places as well. Why fear no evil? Not because evil will never visit every one of us ... sooner or later it will. And not because we will get to stay in the green pastures ... we cannot. The reason we fear no evil is these five words: *“For Thou Art With Me.”* That is the one thing about which we can be certain, but it is enough. It is enough to make our cup overflow with joy. Jesus the Good Shepherd loves you, and He is with you to comfort and sustain, ahead of you to lead you in the good paths of righteousness, and behind you to follow you with goodness and mercy ... not just once in a while, but all the days of your lives.

And as this Table represents, this Lord is not only a Shepherd, but also a Host. The Lord is a gracious and lavish host who went to a lot of trouble to prepare this Table for us ... and because of His broken body and shed blood, we, too, may dwell in the house of the Lord forever.