

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Year B

RCL



Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

The Collect

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Acts 4:5-12

The day after they had arrested Peter and John for teaching about Jesus and the resurrection, the rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is

‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

Psalm 23 Page 612, BCP

Dominus regit me

¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Yea, 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 they comfort me.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

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

John 10:11-18

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

SERMONⁱ

As we were leaving last Sunday, one of you asked me to preach on the 23rd Psalm. When I looked in the Lectionary for today, there's the 23rd Psalm. I went to Frankfort for some required training this week, and you want to guess what one of the texts was? The lesson here, church, is be careful what you ask for...

The 23rd Psalm is perhaps the best-known passage in the entire Bible. We hear it at funerals a lot, but, honestly, this isn't really a funeral sort of Psalm. It's a Psalm of thanksgiving for life, not a dirge of sad farewell! If we take the black crepe and funeral trappings off of this wonderful prayer of trust and intimacy with God, and if we pray through it with our Jewish brothers and sisters, we find some surprising things about the ineffable holiness of God's name, and the way we are to approach the sacred.

In Hebrew, the Psalm begins and ends with the personal name of God. Remember, God's name isn't "God". God's name is represented by the tetragrammaton, four Hebrew letters of such holiness that it is not spoken, even when reading Torah aloud in Hebrew. In place of pronouncing the Name of God, the word "Adonai", meaning "LORD" or "Hashem" meaning simply "the Name" is spoken. Our English translation follows this custom, translating the name of God into "The Lord". That's respectful, but it makes the name of God invisible. Unless someone tells you, you grow up thinking God's name is "God" or "the Lord".

Thinking of a name as being too holy to even speak is a bit tough to wrap our 21st Century minds around, but that is exactly the point. Because the Name of God is holy, we are commanded:

⁷Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

We understand this Commandment to be satisfied when we guard our tongues from a well-known curse. The truth is that we take the Name in vain when we address God, even by His title, without thought, as when we exclaim, “Oh God! That steak was delicious” or “Oh, Lord! I’m tired”. Our sense of familiarity with God, born of the casual manner in which we use the word, “God”, has eroded our appreciation for His holiness such that “God” becomes a sort of stronger version of “Golly!”. Yet our Jewish brothers and sisters teach us that the personal Name of God is too holy for our lips, while the Psalmist teaches us that we ARE privileged to address an intimate prayer to God for he begins his prayer:

¹The LORD is my shepherd;

And ends it with the same:

⁶... I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Intimacy is different from familiarity. Familiarity breeds contempt. Intimacy does not. God is too holy for us to feel on familiar terms with Him, but God offers Himself to us on intimate terms.

And what does the Psalmist say? He confesses, “The LORD is my shepherd.” The Psalmist confesses that God is his shepherd, but unlike the shepherd passages in the New Testament, such as our passage from John today, this Psalm speaks of one Shepherd, one sheep. The relationship the Psalmist perceives is a one-to-one relationship, not a one-to-many, shepherd to flock relationship. The Hebrew Scriptures are much more about the relationship between God and His people, the Israelites.

This is not what the Psalmist sees at all. The Psalmist sees God as shepherding him in his individual journey. It is remarkable!

We need to address the concept of a shepherd at this point, I think. We're likely to be carrying around the image of a Bedouin sheep herder in our minds. That would be a mistake here. The Psalmist has started his prayer with the personal name of God. It is not appropriate to apply the mental image of a Bedouin sheep herder to the personal name of God. Some other image must be intended, and so it is. A shepherd is a title granted to a king. A king is to shepherd his people in ways that lead to their well-being. It's an image that we continue to hold of leadership. If the price of gasoline goes up, we blame the president, although the president has as much to do with the world price of gasoline as he has to do with the world price of marshmallows. We expect our

leaders to lead us in directions in which we wish to be lead, in other words, and blame them when things don't turn out as we wished, leading politicians since time immemorial to recite, "There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader."

The sort of shepherding that the Psalmist has in mind, though, is much different. Here, the Psalmist says

¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

The traditional translation, "I shall not want" can cause a problem for contemporary people. In our century, one in which we have come to "want" all sorts of things that we don't need, the traditional translation sounds as if we are expressing our belief that God will give us everything we want. That's Santa Claus, not God, and is clearly not the sense of the Hebrew. The better translation might be, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing". The Psalmist is giving thanks that

God will provide that which is needed by the Psalmist to complete the purpose for which he was placed in God's Creation. It's important to remember that we each have a purpose, and God will provide that which is necessary to us to perform that purpose.

I cannot overstate the importance of that. As soon as you read "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not ever lose my job and become poor", you will start to think of those who have lost their jobs as sheep of a different shepherd, and conclude that it's their own fault that they're poor. Upon such rocks is all compassion wrecked. Poverty isn't a sign of God's displeasure and the Psalmist offers no such message.

How does the Psalmist understand God's provisioning of him for his purpose?

² He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.

That sounds pretty good. There's a carefully manicured lawn on the walk we take with Sarge each afternoon, and Sarge certainly makes lying in it look inviting. The image of still waters is comforting as well, but I'm interested in the verbs, *makes* and *leads*.

God *makes* us to lie down in green pastures. God doesn't allow us to lie down, nor suggest that we lie down. God *makes* us lie down. It is God who makes us take rest when we need it in pleasant places which He provides. There are times when God insists that we honor our human need for rest. Permission for self care is sometimes hard to grant ourselves. It feels as if we're being lazy, but if God rested after creation, you can, too. That's what the Sabbath is for. God grants you the green pastures of Sunday. Enjoy them!

At other times, God requires of us that we move on from our rest, restored, and go to a different place, to

which He leads us. I'm reminded of God's instruction to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."¹ At those times, God will lead you where you need to go, and, like Abraham, you are to respond. Certainly, God has lead me from a job as an accuser to a job where I am to bring comfort to a congregation who I love more than I have been able to convey. Following God's leadership often takes you to even greener pastures!

God's purpose in leading us is the Psalmist's next topic.

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

Here are two mysteries. What are "right pathways" and what does it mean to follow them "for his Name's sake"? The Hebrew word being translated as "right pathways" in this translation, or "the paths of righteous-

¹ Gen 12:1

ness” in the King James Translation, is *tzedek*. It means both “righteousness” and “justice”. Tzedek refers to the Divine plan and goal for creation where every creature is justly entitled to receive the nurturing and protection that it needs in order to fulfill its purpose within the Creation². Nothing in God’s Creation is without a purpose, but without justice, that purpose cannot be fulfilled. God guides us to justice.

God’s Divine plan is sufficient to insure that each of God’s creatures can fulfill its purpose, but what are we to make of the idea that we are guided along right pathways, “for His Name’s sake”? To understand this, we have to refer to the book of Deuteronomy in a translation by a Lithuanian contemporary of Thomas Jefferson, an 18th Century Rabbi called the Vilna Gaon, or the Isa-

² Samson Raphael Hirsch (June 20, 1808 – December 31, 1888) was a German rabbi best known as the intellectual founder of the Torah im Derech Eretz school of contemporary Orthodox Judaism. Occasionally termed neo-Orthodoxy, his philosophy, together with that of Azriel Hildesheimer, has had a considerable influence on the development of orthodox Judaism.

iah of Vilnius. Remember, Hashem means “the Name” and refers to the personal Name of God, which is not pronounced. “Mitzvos” means the Commandments. Here is the Vilna Gaon's translation of Deuteronomy 28:9-10:

Hashem will establish you as His holy people, as He swore to you, if you observe the mitzvos of Hashem, your God, and you walk in His ways. Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the Name of Hashem is proclaimed over you, and they will revere Hashem – because of you.

“... all the peoples of the earth will see that the Name of Hashem is proclaimed over you” is the phrase we need to focus upon. In his midrash on these verses, the Isaiah of Vilnius explains the phrase in this way:

The Jew is obligated in his world to be attached to the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed Be He; as He is compassionate, so you be compassionate, as He is gracious, so you be gracious.

And on the image of the Jew, the names (attributes) of God will be read of themselves; and he shall be an instructor and a teacher to benefit all of the earth's dwellers – to open the eyes of the blind and to illuminate the world ...

We hear the words of the 23rd Psalm in its usual funeral garb and hear words of comfort in the loss of a loved one. The Isaiah of Vilnius teaches us that God's leading of us in the ways of righteousness is so that the entire world will revere The Name of God because of you. Because of your good acts, your compassionate nature, your graciousness, the world will see the attributes of God written upon you and you shall be an instructor and a teacher to benefit all of the earth's dwellers — to open the eyes of the blind and to illuminate the world with refined faith. Is that not enough to spin your head around? Our Shepherd leads us on the paths of *tzedek* for the sake of the compassionate, loving, and life-giv-

ing attributes associated with His Name that all the world should see them in our actions and persons.

Can you do it, church? Can you live lives such that the world will see the attributes of God written upon you? Can you be an instructor and a teacher to benefit all of earth's dwellers? Can you actually open the eyes of the blind and illuminate the world with refined faith?

Man! That scares me to death! The world is too evil a place for me to do all that! I'm going to need a LOT of help. The Psalmist thinks so, too, but remains confident.

⁴Though 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.

Just as God was with His people in the howling wilderness, so will God be with us as we face up to our purpose in Creation. However lost we may feel in the wilderness, God will care for us:

⁵You 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.

At the close of the prayer, the Psalmist relates that as he goes through his journey here on earth, God's goodness and God's mercy will follow him, and he anticipates that he will live in the Temple at Jerusalem all the days of his life, a verse Christians understand as a promise of life everlasting.

⁶Surely 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.

I want you to focus on your attitude toward the sacred as you read this Psalm. Embrace an intimate relationship with God, church, but beware of an assumption of familiarity, for we are God's creatures, not His equal, and holy is His Name.

Hear again the words of the Psalmist:

Hashem is my king, I shall lack for nothing I
need to serve Hashem.
He grants me His rest upon His Sabbath, which
I shall keep holy and restores me.
He leads me to His purposes that the whole
world might see His attributes reflected in me.
Yeah, though I walk through the dark places
where I cannot see my destination, I shall walk
confidently, for Hashem is with me.
When my enemies gather round about me, He
will fill a table with goodness overflowing in
their presence, so that they may see it.
Surely Hashem's goodness and mercy shall fol-
low me all the days of my life, and I will dwell
with Hashem forever.

AMEN

*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square
brackets.*

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i Much of the midrashim came from <http://www.shemayisrael.com/publicat/hazon/tzedaka/psalm23a.htm>