Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Easter

May 3, 2020

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is one of the best-known passages in the entire Bible. When I am called to the bedside of a person who is sick or dying, it’s what I read. I’ve quoted it repeatedly in my sermons during these past 6 weeks, because we’re all on a journey through the valley of the shadow right now, and we’re all wondering when we will emerge on the other side.

Whenever we encounter passages that are this familiar*,* we need to look for the things we don’t notice anymore. We need to notice the words we skip if we try to recite it from memory.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

That’s the part I don’t notice, the part I skip when I try to speak these words from memory. They are, for me, the hard part of the Psalm, because they bring home the fact that, even though God promises to accompany us and provide for us through life, and that even if we have strong faith and work hard to serve other people, things will not always go well for us. And that, unless we are the rarest of people, we will have enemies.

Which brings to my mind the words of Jesus, “But I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”

If we use a food metaphor, loving the people we like would be like eating our favorite food. And loving our enemies – praying for people we don’t like, for people who don’t like us, and asking God to provide for their well-being – is like Jesus showing us a bowl full of the yuckiest, smelliest vegetable there is, and telling us to dig in.

Jesus has a knack for telling us to do the things we don’t want to do, because he knows they’re the things we *need to do* if we’re going to have any chance of seeing the world the way God sees it.

This Psalm speaks to what it’s like to receive God’s grace and mercy. It invites us to look at the bounty of creation and the good people in our lives, and be full of wonder and gratitude that God has provided for us in such ways, in such abundance that we can feel as if our cup overflows.

We’re invited to wonder what it would feel like for God to restore our souls. But to understand that feeling, we need to know what it is that erodes our souls in the first place.

While we’d probably rather not admit it, many of us have a list of people we’d be happy to see taken down a notch or two, people we’d prefer didn’t get their way.

But that takes us to the shameful realization that we don’t always want to pray for our enemies, for those who seek to do us harm. It takes us to the realization that our ego and our desire to judge others get in the way of seeing them as God sees them.

And it can make us wonder if we have an easier time saying the opening words of this Psalm, of expressing trust in God, when we feel pretty confident that things are going to work out the way we want them to.

Thank God, we’re forgiven when we fall short. When we can’t bring ourselves to try. When the thought of praying for our enemies, for those who have wronged us, is too much, and we just say, “You know what, God? It’s not that I can’t, it’s that I *don’t want to.*”

I can’t help but wonder if all of that – our egos, our need to be right, our desire to feel like we have control over our lives, our unwillingness to see some people the way God sees them – if all of that is what erodes our souls. It’s exhausting, isn’t it? It is certainly not life-giving.

But then I think about the last verse of the Psalm – “Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

And I remember that the word ‘follow’ doesn’t fully express what the Hebrew word means. It doesn’t just mean ‘follow,’ but ‘pursue,’ or ‘chase after.’ As if God is constantly following us, right on our heels, pointing at the direction we should go, trying to get our attention, so God can lead us to paths of righteousness, lead us by still waters, take us to that table where we’ll be fed and our cup will overflow, and steer us away from the things that erode our souls.

And somehow, the realization that God is endlessly, tirelessly chasing after me, never ever giving up, is what brings a little peace to my heart. That God knows I’m going to get distracted, that my ego will demand to be heard, and my attention will be diverted toward selfish thoughts. But God’s not going to stop and say, “OK. Have it your way. I’ll be waiting here when you decide you need me.”

Instead, God is pointing to the blessings of my life and the ways that I can be a blessing to others, and inviting me to live a life where I *can* say the words, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” with honesty.

The fact that 6 simple verses can take me on that kind of a journey, can speak to us when we are in the darkest part of the valley of the shadow or when we feel like our cup overflows, is exactly why it’s one of the best-known passages in the Bible.

Throughout these 6 verses, we are reminded that we can trust in God, that God doesn’t just accompany us but provides for us. We are invited, then, to put aside our fear. To live our lives guided by hope and faith and trust in God, instead of anxiety and uncertainty and fear.

May we find in this Psalm not just the comfort we need and the reminder to look for how God provides for us and where God is leading us, but a better understanding of what salvation is like, of what it means to be restored from all that erodes our souls.