

Grace and peace to you.

We are still in the Easter Season, but after three weeks of gospel stories which occurred on Easter Day, our lectionary texts have left that one, chronological day, to pursue the identity of the Jesus who rose from the dead. Jesus the Good Shepherd this week, the vine next week, followed by the one in whose love we abide the Sunday before Pentecost. We are no longer following along a chronological plotline, but I do want to connect us to last week, when I highlighted the goodness of creation – specifically our human bodies, and more generally, all physical matter: the stuff of the cosmos.

We are constantly tempted to sink into escapist oblivion, by that I mean escaping the challenges and fears of the world by either simply ignoring those issues exist (this is my go-to when the world just seems too much to bear), or by fixating on the promise of heaven and the afterlife (a promise worthy of expectation and anticipation, but not – I would say – to the detriment of life here on earth). Jesus gives us the example we are to follow: resurrected in his own body, healed yet scared by the wounds he picked up while living and dying, he chooses to be with his disciples in our Easter Day stories.

And in today's passage, chronologically earlier, before the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus compares himself to a shepherd who stays with the sheep he loves so dearly even when, especially when, confronted by challenges and danger. Like the familiar Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd... We got out of the practice of including the appointed psalm during COVID, and have yet to reintroduce it, but the psalm assigned for today is Psalm 23. Let's look at it together for a moment. Pick up one of our hymnals if you have it nearby, and flip the pages right before the hymns start. The entire Psalter (book of Psalms) is in our hymnal. Fun fact: the last Psalm (which are poems or songs) is number 150, and the first piece of music in the ELW is number 151! But we are looking at Psalm 23! It's not the King James version so many of us are familiar with, but this is a faithful translation from the Hebrew text. You'll notice some extra hyphens and lines if you are looking at the hymnal. Those are marks to show which syllables align with psalm tones for chanting. Let's read it together, in unison, out loud:

- 1The LORD | is my shepherd;
I shall not | be in want.
- 2The LORD makes me lie down | in green pastures
and leads me be- | side still waters.
- 3You restore my | soul, O LORD,
and guide me along right pathways | for your name's sake.
- 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.
- 5You prepare a table before me in the presence | of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is | running over.
- 6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days | of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the | LORD forever.

Marie just read this Psalm at Tina's funeral, and a family member will read it at Ed's memorial, tomorrow – it's familiar and comforting.

What makes it so comforting? Can you pin down what it is about this poem that you find soothing? Perhaps the images of being provided for? Or the presence of a protector amidst danger? My Dad has shared the story of his mom receiving some of the earliest experimental radiation treatment for cancer. There was no targeting the radiation at that time, so she was alone in a lead-lined room for these

treatments. Grandma would recite the 23rd Psalm, and in that amount of time the round of therapy would be complete. It got her through that valley of death, and she beat that round of cancer to go on to raise her two young sons.

In Jesus' self-proclamation of the Good Shepherd, and in the first letter of John, the presence of God in Jesus, with us even in suffering and death – present with us through any and all tribulations – that is the mark of a Good Shepherd and a defining aspect of our God, who does not hide in heaven but chooses to dwell with us, even as one of us for a while.

While the idea of a Rapture at the end of days has been popular, especially the last fifty-or-so years, escaping to heaven while the earth and most of God's creatures suffer tribulation, just does not fit with the Biblical witness! Creation is very good, worthy of God's presence dwelling within. The Lord is our Good Shepherd who never abandons the flock risking harm to himself and even death for the sake of the sheep. And Jesus' first followers, in the days right after his ascension back into heaven, followed soon after by the Holy Spirit descending to anoint them, Peter and the apostles came out of hiding to do the work of healing and feeding people, of sharing the good news of Jesus – the Good Shepherd who died and rose from the dead.

Neither Jesus nor the Early Church sank into escapist oblivion (that state I am so often tempted by). Escaping the world was not God's plan for them (nor us), and the Holy Spirit baptized them in fire to continue God's work in Creation. They continued in the same goodness and mercy Psalm 23 leaves us with: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (verse 6).

Now, I remembered from my Hebrew class, so many years ago now, that the psalms (as poetry written in a notoriously poetic and therefore challenging to translate language, i.e. Hebrew) especially Psalm 23, is an odd one to fit into English in a way that makes sense. I looked at it again, thanks to Bible translation software that allows me to look at the Hebrew with built in translation dictionaries and there were some odd places that I once again couldn't make heads or tails out of, but in slogging through the unfamiliar Hebrew text, I noticed that last verse, what's translated for us as "goodness and mercy" is a Hebrew word I've shared with you before: *Hesed* – "1. **obligation to the community** in relation to relatives, friends, guests, master & servants... 2. *hesed* in relation of God to people or individuals, **faithfulness, kindness, grace**".¹ Most certainly, we receive goodness and mercy, aka grace, from our Good Shepherd, Jesus. I would posit that, as members of Jesus' flock, having received those free gifts of mercy, forgiveness, unconditional love, we are obligated to share them with the rest of God's creation. That is the example we see in our lessons from the Acts of the Apostles! And this is what Lutheran theologians would say is the Holy Spirit working within us – the second part of grace. Because the experience of receiving grace: God's goodness and mercy, does not leave us unchanged, but transformed. Transformed to love and serve the whole creation, which God declared very good, into which God was born as a human creature, all of which is God's chosen dwelling place. Why would we want to escape the very place God chooses to dwell!?

It's hard, believe me, I get it! But what a wonder to share the good news that God is here, that God freely gives us mercy and goodness, even in deathly shadows. Thanks be to God, amen.

¹William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), BibleWorks, v.10.