



Sermon

Psalm 23

Meditation The Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 13, 2008

Historic St. George's UMC

Rev. Alfred T. Day III

From the Back End

...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Psalm 23:6

I can hardly think of a time that I did not know these words:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters.

He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his names sake.

Yea, 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.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;

Thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Psalm 23

We memorized Psalm 23 in third grade Sunday School, Mrs. Cook was the teacher. We got a little glow-in-the-dark good shepherd for our efforts. In my mind's eye I can still see it in my childhood bedroom. Holding hands with people before surgery these are the words that bring some comfort and confidence amidst understandable anxieties. I've connected with people in nursing homes who don't recognize me or won't remember the pastor came calling. All I say is, "The Lord is my shepherd." By the time I get to "he maketh me lie down in green pastures," they're with me word for word. I've asked families preparing funerals about scripture passages for the service. Psalm 23 is always the first request. Nine times out of ten, these are the words on the little prayer cards the funeral director hands you when you sign the visitors book. When

we haven't known what to pray or what to say, these are the words that brought us close to home, close to what we want, hope and need from God and Jesus – The Lord is my shepherd... I am the Good shepherd... I am the gate for the sheep. For all that, I'm wondering if we haven't so loaded good ol' Psalm 23 from the front end that we're missing the back end. I'm wondering if we haven't concentrated so much on the shepherd image that we've missed the punch line: ... "and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Those words say God has given us a home. The Psalmist calls it "house of the Lord" and says we live there always. This "house of the Lord" lacks nothing. It is lush, abundant and beautiful. Different from the chaotic, disordered, messy places of our lives, it is a place of nourishing green pastures and quiet pools. It is a place where still waters and silence carry us to wellsprings of faith. The house of the Lords stands in stark contrast to all the noise and distraction in life, to the desperation of endless To-Do lists, to our forever seeking acceptance, love and security. In "the house of the Lord" our cups are already filled to overflowing. God is our home says the 23rd Psalm. And what this old faithful word says to us is the more we know that – really know that – and the more we believe that in our heart of hearts, the more we shift from anxiety to assurance, from fear to fullness, from getting to gratitude.

Richard Foster, a Quaker who writes about prayer and spiritual discipline tells about a time of temporary homelessness in his childhood when he learned about finding home in God. He describes this as the time he got in touch with his "grateful center." When Foster was seven, his family moved from their native Nebraska to the West Coast. But there was a problem along the way. They ran out of money before they reached their destination and were forced to

spend a winter living in a cabin in the Rocky Mountains. Ironically, what must have been a difficult time for Foster's parents – a time of feeling like poor providers and planners – turned out to be heaven for young Richard. He remembers that unlike the old, noisy, scary coal furnace in their Nebraska home, the cabin had a big fireplace. And every night, Foster slept near the fireplace, on a sofa bed, under a big, heavy quilt. He writes: "Night after night I would fall asleep watching this strange yellow blaze that warmed us all. It became my grateful center. It has stayed with me ever since." Foster says he goes to this grateful center in times of feeling off course in his life. What would your grateful center be? All of us are blessed with experiences that reveal this grateful center by way of family, church, and circle of friends, the wonders nature –the mountains, the garden, the beach. For Richard Foster, what might have been a frightening, traumatic, bitter time became a place of adventure, foundation and spiritual growth.

That grateful center is to "dwell in the house of the Lord," I think. It is to be rooted and grounded in the love of God. Trouble is, we get knocked off track, live as we forget our home address, live out of the house of fear instead of the house of the Lord. The Bible from Genesis to Revelation could be summed up as story after story of God's people confused, reluctant, stubborn, knocked off-track, moving out of the house of fear into the "house of the Lord." We want to keep one foot in each of those houses, not quite faithful enough to let ourselves be scooped up by a love that knows us and calls us by name, as Good Shepherd Jesus describes it in Gospel of John. It's easy to live in the house of fear without realizing it. Fear invades every part of our lives. The stock market the way it's been, will our pensions be there when we need them? How will we pay for college, or health care, or just break even. The world is a scary place. Are we eating the right foods and getting enough exercise? How many times does the phrase "terrorist threat" get said in every newscast? In the election cycle we're in, candidates play on fears to gain our support. We are even afraid of people of faith – people of a faith different from than ours – particularly Muslims, questioning their

motivations and trustworthiness. Our Wednesday Five Faiths One God, One Community study group really struggled making sense of Islam until Elaine Barnes introduced us to Shakir Abul Ali, who grew up Methodist at Mother Zoar (of all things), and who serves as a US Army Chaplain – a Muslim Chaplain. His understanding of God/Allah, his understanding of the divine will in life and his questions and struggles along the journey of faith made us feel like we found a new brother in God's household. But most of what we hear and see in the media makes us fear Muslims and others different from us. It's easy to live in a house of fear without realizing it. Fears shape our decisions and choices. By the way, I met a Muslim religious leader at an interfaith event last week. He works in here in the states. He named his first child Moses and his second child Jesus in an effort to assure those who feared Islam of his gratitude and respect for the other faiths of Abraham. This man lives in "the house of the Lord." "The house of the Lord" is a place where we can think, speak, and act in the ways of God – not in the ways of a fear filled world. Jesus, the one we know as Good Shepherd, says elsewhere in John, "Live in me, make your home in me just as I live and make my home in you." (John 15:4) In such a dwelling place the grateful center is found. And as we unpack ourselves in this grateful center, we move from fear to the free joy of gratitude. Says Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman commenting on the twenty-third psalm: "It is pretentious to comment on this psalm – we know it so well. In the end, its message says that companionship with God is what transforms every situation. It does not mean there are no death valleys, no enemies but death valleys and enemies are not capable of ultimate hurt. Psalm 23 knows that evil is in the world, but it is not to be feared. Confidence in God is the center of joy and peace."

Sometimes experiences of the unexpected allow the Spirit of God to break the habits of the heart that keep us from knowing our grateful center. I'm reminded of a story heard on NPR's All Things Considered about a massive power outage a few summers ago. Most of Ohio was affected but none more profoundly than the man who was director of the planetarium outside

Cleveland. His story called "Voices in the Blackout" told about Jay Reynolds seeing opportunity in the power outage. What could have been a long night fear or nervousness or boredom became a serendipitous, unforgettable celebration of community, awe, amazement and gratitude. Here's what happened. Before sunset, so that everyone in his neighborhood would notice, Reynolds set up a huge telescope in his front yard. He invited everyone around to come and see the marvels of the sky as they had never seen them before. The deep black of the sky, free of the usual interference of artificial light, revealed an astronomical wonders one might never see. The whole sky was alive. Planets. Meteors. "It was an unbelievable night to see the stars the way they were meant to be seen," Reynolds said. I'm guessing the people in Dr. Reynolds got in touch with a grateful center because of the creativity and generosity of a neighbor who loved the stars and creation, because of the creativity and abundance of the Creator who set the universe and stars in their places, the Creator who can put on a show like that, and because a problem turned into an opportunity to see something one might never have seen without the crisis. Haven't you experienced something like this? Or how the greatest surprises, miracles,

amazing memories and profound revelations come less by way of God's audible voice or being poked or prodded with the shepherd's crook and more because we find ourselves in a position to see or hear something that was always there but we were in no shape to notice? The something that was always there, the something that is around and about us always is "the house of the Lord." The place where we experience the unearned, unmerited, nurturing, restoring, abundance of God's love, the amazing grace for which the hearts prayer is simply, "Thank you." The God who creates a home for us, the God who house has many mansions and who has been our dwelling place for generation upon generation as the Bible says it, is our grateful center. I'll still treasure my little glow in the dark Good Shepherd from Mrs. Cook's class as I'm sure you treasure "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want..." in whatever ways you do. But by God, let us not forget the punch line of good ol' number 23 about dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. God, bring us to, keep us in touch with our grateful centers.

Amen.

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