

Homily, St. Andrew's
Easter 4B, Sunday, April 26, 2015
Psalm 23

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” These might be the most iconic words of the Bible. Psalm 23 is quite possibly the best known bible passage, its words deeply symbolic of God's love... a poem of the very embodiment of God's comfort and peace. And yet Psalm 23 goes so far beyond comfort. It is a psalm most often associated with funerals, and yet it is a psalm fundamentally about life. It is a psalm for the living, and so it comes to us not in Lent or Holy Week but now, on this fourth Sunday of Easter, in the midst of renewed life, as part of our focus today on the image of God as the Good Shepherd.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman, developed a helpful framework for understanding the psalms, and it's a helpful framework that offers us a way of reflecting on Psalm 23. Brueggemann develops a simple scheme of 3 basic categories. They are: orientation, dis-orientation and new orientation. He describes psalms of orientation as ones that express well-being felt in times of stability and prosperity. Psalms of dis-orientation are ones that express the hurt and pain of suffering or loss – they are psalms that lament the upsetting of the previous season of well-being. Finally, there are psalms of new orientation... these are psalms that express thanksgiving for the new thing God is doing. After the anguish and the lament, the loss of well-being, comes a season of surprise and joy that God has not abandoned us and is, indeed, sovereign.

Brueggeman notes that in our culture, we wish to avoid the loss and pain that characterize the movement from orientation to dis-orientation... that's hardly surprising, but what is interesting is that Brueggeman also notes that in our culture we also resist and wish to avoid surprise and the genuine newness that comes with new orientation. The uncertainty of genuine newness can be as unsettling and can evoke as much fear, as the prospect of loss and pain. It's an interesting observation and one supported by the reaction of fear and doubt in most, if not all, of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances in the Gospels. It's also true that when we avoid or deny the losses in our life, when we work hard not to live through lent and Holy Week, we also miss out on the new life God has for us - in resurrection.

Brueggeman writes of Psalm 23 as one of the last type – a psalm of new orientation because it expresses the gratitude of having come out on the other side of suffering. It doesn't seem to relate to a specific trouble or event, at least not one we can readily identify from history, and so it expresses instead a generalized sense of confidence and trust that that God cares for us in whatever season of life we find ourselves in: from stability and well-being, to loss and pain and then on to new life, new promise, new hope. So much more than an icon of comfort and peace, Psalm 23 offers the confidence that God provides all we need for life... for new and restored life... and so it is, in the deepest sense, a psalm for the living.

The psalm begins and ends by describing God as providing for all the needs of life using 2 different sets of imagery. The first image is that of a shepherd caring for sheep by providing

food in green pastures, water to drink and safety enough that the sheep lie down, knowing that the shepherd is watching out for them, and they need not fear the threat of predators. The second image leaves the agricultural behind and takes us to table fellowship. God provides by setting a table for us, by providing food, and an over-flowing cup. This table is set “in the presence of our enemies,” but still we are confident that God will keep us safe, such that we are able to sit and enjoy the abundance of life God has for us.

If these 2 scenes of safety, security and prosperity were all the psalm was about, then in Brueggemann’s scheme, it would more likely be categorized as a psalm of orientation. But the key middle verse changes everything: “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” It is this central phrase that transforms the psalm from simply an expression of comfort and well-being to a testimony of God’s commitment to life and the salvation from fear that God’s faithfulness makes manifest. Moreover, the promise of Psalm 23 tells us some important things about the nature of God and our lives: “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me...”

This one phrase gets to the heart of a classic theological issue that has to do with the core of what we believe about God and how God acts in the world. Its basis is simply that the sovereignty of God means that everything that happens is God’s will. The problem is that if everything that happens is God’s will, then God is responsible for the good, the bad and the ugly of our lives and the world. If God is in control, then God doesn’t care all that much about the people of Nepal this week. People who struggle with homelessness, poverty or hunger must have done something wrong to deserve God’s punishment. The trials and losses we suffer are tests to help us grow in faith, and those things that seem bad or cause us pain are actually good, and we’ll discover the silver lining sometime in the future. All of these explanations for what has been called “the problem of evil” are at best unhelpful and at worst, they can lead to apathy, oppression and abuse. For many, believing in a God whose primary characteristic is love and who is also in control of everything that happens means that we have to find a way to intellectually let God off the hook for the tough stuff or we have to deny that there is any ‘real’ tough stuff at all.

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me...” This central verse of Psalm 23 flies in the face of all the shallow explanations and faces directly into the tough stuff. There is no denial here... there really are deathly valleys and in the next verse, there really are enemies and yet neither are not capable of everlasting hurt, because as Brueggemann writes: “It is God’s companionship that transforms every situation... the powerful loyalty and solidarity of Yahweh *comfort*, precisely in situations of threat. As the assertion of ‘comfort’ is exile-ending, so here it is wilderness-ending... Psalm 23 knows that evil is present in the world, but it is not feared. Confidence in God is the source of new orientation.” (156)

The season of Easter is about re-developing this confidence in God - a God who is not in control but who is in relationship. Our confidence in God provides comfort not because God is responsible for everything that happens but because God’s presence makes us capable, confident, that we can walk through whatever terrain comes our way... whatever circumstance we find ourself in. The new orientation of God’s presence with us banishes fear, clearing the way for us to choose love and peace instead, just as Jesus did. The point of faith... the faith of the poet who

gave us Psalm 23 as much as the faith of Mary, Peter, Paul and the rest of the Jesus' disciples... is, in the end, the comfort of salvation - salvation that gives us the ability to move through fear to find faith and to know the fullness of transformed life in this world. Salvation is to experience a new orientation, beyond the shadow of death, that brings real change to how we live in the world and not just beyond the world.

Psalm 23 ends with the promise that God will pursue us with this goodness and mercy our whole lives long. And then it offers a kind of challenge to respond to the steadfastness of God's love, with our own words of confidence and trust: "... I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The challenge of fulfilling such a statement is to live in relationship with God, to depend on God always, for all our needs in life... in every season of life. May we meet this challenge head-on, facing in to the deathly valleys and journeying through with the confidence and trust that God journeys with us. May we embrace the new orientation God gives us in the process and live into it with confidence and trust, forever.