

You Prepare A Table

Matthew 14:22-33

Psalm 23

In the worship service each week we have a confession of faith. Together we read or recite something like the Apostles Creed together as a way to give public voice to our trust in God. This morning I invite you to read our next Scripture lesson out loud with me; and to offer it as a statement of our trust in God through Christ Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

Psalm 23

“On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples.” That was not only “the night he was betrayed”, but also the night he was denied, deserted, arrested, and beaten. On that night, maybe the worst night of his life, Jesus took the bread and the cup and gave them to his followers, saying, “do this in remembrance of me.”

Lord, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

When I was the chaplain at Davidson College, one spring a splinter group of the Ku Klux Klan announced that it would march in a hundred towns across the state. Our little town of Davidson was on their list. When word got around the campus, many of the students were furious that the Klan would come to our town with their message of bigotry and separatism. They began to talk of confrontation; of surrounding the Klan during its march and shouting them down; or lying in the street to block their path.

Some of us on the staff began to meet with the students. Our goal was to help them see that hate groups thrive on hate; that conflict in the street would get the KKK on TV, which is what they wanted most of all. It would no doubt bring them back to our town again and again.

So we came up with a new plan. We announced a Community Fellowship Picnic for that very Saturday morning. The picnic would be held on the far side of the campus, away from our little main street. Students went door to door in the town and invited everyone, Black and white, both sides of the track, to leave Main Street empty that morning and come to our picnic. There we would have a gospel choir from the AME church, a blue grass band from the students, games and fried chicken, and fun for all ages. They asked the few merchants on Main Street to close their shops that morning as well.

The town did just that. They all came to the picnic, or at least stayed completely away from the center of town. So when the knights of the KKK marched that morning, they marched through a ghost town of empty streets and shuttered stores. No one paid them any attention at all. They got out of their pickup trucks on one end, walked four blocks, got back in the trucks and never came back. Everybody else was having a party together, young and old, black and white, town and college.

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

You know, sometimes we regard the 23rd psalm as a kind of children's Bible verse. This may be because it is one of the first pieces of scripture we learn. It shows up in vacation Bible school. Pictures of Jesus holding a lamb are popular in children's Sunday school rooms. Or at least they used to be.

But I find it a very adult reflection on our walk with God; our walk through life. There is a great deal of realism in this psalm. While confessing faith in God, the writer (maybe King David as a young man), the writer acknowledges the struggles of life. There is great fatigue. We need rest; we need our souls restored by still waters. There is a valley of the shadow. We have enemies. We need somebody to wield the rod and the staff to protect us along the way.

I picture David as a young man, camped way out in the hills, watching the sheep. I see him peering into the darkness wondering whether wolves or even a mountain lion is lurking there, ready for a lamp chop or two. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. There is trouble. But there is also the God who provides, who watches over us, who sends the Savior, our Good Shepherd, into the trouble with us.

Our other Scripture lesson is from Matthew. There we find the story of Jesus walking on the water early in the morning, coming to his disciples on the wind tossed sea. Peter asks Jesus to call him to come out on the water. Then Peter gets out. But you know how that goes. He becomes frightened by all the trouble, the waves, the wind, the lack of solid ground. We read of Peter starting to sink like a stone. This brings us to some of the most wonderful words in the Gospel. "Jesus caught Peter." Jesus caught Peter and got him back into the boat. He did not let him sink. He did not tell him, "sink or swim." Jesus caught Peter and helped him back into the safety of the boat.

Jesus would also "catch" Peter on other days as well. And after Peter's denial of Jesus on the night he was betrayed and arrested, Jesus caught him again, at a meal beside the sea shore, after the resurrection. There he asked "Peter, do you love me?" "Yes Lord, you know I love you." "Then feed my sheep." The Good Shepherd protects Peter, and asks him to care for the flock.

You and I live in a world full of trouble. The waves are high right now. The US economy is stalled. Congress and the president are in a log jam. Famine has struck in Somalia, again; a hurricane is headed for Haiti. In various lives around the room this morning there are more troubles as well. We know something about the wolves and the mountain lion lurking in the dark, even though we live in the city.

And yet we dare to make a confession of faith in God. We dare to declare together our belief that the Lord is our shepherd; Our Good Shepherd. He is the one who spreads a table before us in the presence of our troubles, our enemies. You and I know that the life of faith is not about find a smooth road, or easy answers. It is about walking with the Savior through it all, and knowing that Jesus is there to catch us. Christ is there with rod and staff to protect us. Christ is there at the table to welcome us.

The life of faith means trusting in God's provision so much that we are willing to share what we have; to help feed his sheep. We share the bread at this table today. We share our bread with homeless people in our city through CARITAS and the Food Bank. We share our bread through the Presbyterian Disaster Relief with folk in Somalia and Haiti. Sharing is a great statement of faith in the One who prepares a table for us; who provides what we need.

The Lord is our Good Shepherd, we have what we need.

God prepares a table before us, so that we have enough and enough to share.

Dr. Charlie Summers

Two questions for further reflection on Psalm 23:

How do you experience God as the One who provides for you?

How do you express that faith?