

19th Sunday After Pentecost October 11, 2020

Affirm Stewardship Campaign- Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is a familiar text. Both for those who regularly attend worship and those who do not. It is often read at funerals or in moments of crisis- severe illness or catastrophe. Times when we need comfort. But why is that?

The Lord is my shepherd. Who is a shepherd? The one who makes sure the flock has food and water and is safe. The one who guides and leads them to those things and who protects the sheep from danger. If my shepherd is the Lord... I shall not be in want. I shall not lack... what? Anything, essential to my survival. Why? The Lord is my shepherd, and a shepherd makes sure the sheep have food, water, shelter, and are safe.

The Lord is the one who guides me to green pastures- At least one author has pointed out- green pastures in the land of Israel is often not verdant fields of lush green we in the West imagine. Rather, it is hillsides with just enough growing on it for a mouthful here, and a mouthful there. Exactly what God provided to the Israelites as they wandered. Enough, for the day. Enough to keep moving to the next destination.

He leads me beside still waters. Again, our minds tend to go to a big lake- placid and flat as glass. But in the context of the Middle East, still water is probably a slow-moving stream. This is right because what shepherd will leave their flock near rushing water- which might carry them away at any moment? Still water is safer- moving enough to be healthy but having no danger of hurting the sheep.

You restore my soul, O Lord. Restore is *shub*, in the Hebrew. It can also mean return, turn back. God restores our soul to what it should be.

You guide me along the right track. If you look on the hillsides in the Middle East, at least in sheep country, you will find parallel sets of lines running across the hillsides. These are the right pathways, the ones that lead to water, food, shelter.

Even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death- I will fear no evil because your ability to defend and protect me comforts me. I know that no matter what comes in this valley, even death- I will come out the other side and you will get me there.

The Lord, my shepherd, sets a table for me in front of- in the presence of- my enemies. I always see this as literally my enemies are right in front of me, armed and ready to pounce, and God comes along and sets down a table, tablecloth, and whips out this abundance of food and drink. My mental image is a bit like the old Bugs Bunny cartoons. My cup, overflows. Literally it means, my cup is saturated. Has an abundance, can't hold anymore, it overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. The Hebrew says something more like surely goodness and lovingkindness (an attribute almost exclusively given to God) shall pursue me, chase me down, all the days of my life. It is scarily comforting to know God is pursuing me with goodness and loving kindness no matter how far I run. As for me, I will dwell in God's house forever. Why? God is my shepherd, God leads me to all I need to survive, God offers goodness and lovingkindness, and God has anointed me- chosen me.

When I think of this text, particularly at this moment in time. I came back to filled to overflowing. We had *Growing in Generosity Sunday* last week where those present were given a gift of grace \$5. The encouragement was to go out and share that gift with others.

I have heard back from several of those in attendance and we shared one story in our E-news and will be sharing others in the coming weeks. One thing that comes through is the joy in which they tell about having this gift and sharing it. We recognize that the abundance that we have comes from God, our Shepherd, and that we are stewards of the things we have been given. Making use of them as the owner would wish. We are thankful for what we have been given food, green pastures, still waters, enough for today and more than enough. A cup saturated, filled to overflowing, and so we share from our abundance, as God shares with us.

There is within us, and maybe this is the image of God showing through, a natural impulse to share. I saw it in our town during the derecho. Before the winds had stopped people were outside, I heard the chainsaws, saw neighbors out helping neighbors, sometimes before helping themselves. I saw and heard stories of shared generators, shared food, shared freezer and refrigerator space. We had the witness from our City Manager about how those working for us shared their equipment and energy to clear the debris. Our library, with St. John member Sarah Sellon leading, became a place where those who still were without power could come and get cool and get internet.

I saw how we responded to the even greater needs in Cedar Rapids. My neighbor across the street collecting food and other items from people in town and leaving time and again to deliver those items to people in need.

There is risk, though, in that generosity. One that sits at the back of our minds. Particularly in that moment when you don't quite know how it will come back, what might go away that you will need. A natural impulse to conserve- because you don't know how it will affect your life down the line.

And that is when we need this reminder, this image from the 23rd Psalm. A table before us filled, a cup overflowing. An invitation- even to our enemies- to sit at the table provided by God where there is no need to fight because everyone has what they need and then some. An image of sharing the abundance God has given us to steward, this overflowing cup.

Can we even see an abundance in our lives? Sometimes, it feels like we never have enough. Our culture seems to be built around that feeling of lack, of scarcity. Capitalism is dependent on someone convincing you, you don't have enough. Right?

It is good to stop and look and be thankful for what we have. So, stop right now and name it for yourself. Name the abundance you have. I have a car that works. I have a roof over my head, maybe even paid for. I have a closet or dresser full of clothes. Maybe what you have in abundance is not material things, but time, or the talents that reside in your body- craftsmanship, knowledge of how things work, cooking, hospitality, a head for numbers, the gift of storytelling. God has given all of us what we need for today, and then some. And ,as we learned in our Sunday School focus

on the Creation story in Genesis, all of what we have was created by God, is God's- given now to us to steward for a time.

This week, we introduced our 2020 Stewardship Campaign here at St. John with the theme, *Affirm*. Last Sunday, we had 5 young women affirm their baptism and promise to strive to live out their faith. This affirmation is not a once and done thing. As believers, we wake up every day and affirm again our commitment to God, particularly how this commitment relates to the gifts God has given to us. As the old LBW offertory prayer says, "We give you thanks for what you have first given us, ourselves, our time, our money, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love." Our hope with this campaign is to make us more aware of God's generosity in our lives, those places where our cup is overflowing.

We will ponder together how God is calling us to grow spiritually through our growing in giving from our abundance- especially giving to the mission and ministry of St. John. This part of the Body of Christ in Ely, IA. Some may ask, Why a campaign? Let's be frank, talking about money is awkward, especially in a church. It raises the specter of televangelism, "Give me \$100 and Jesus will give you a yacht!". But that's not what we are doing here.

Our Stewardship Team is leading us in this because Jesus talks about money and its relationship to our faith more than just about anything except the Kingdom of God. We've especially heard that this year in the gospel of Matthew, right? The rich young ruler, Jesus' reflection on the offering of the widow in the Temple. Time and again Jesus points to the fact that we need to be mindful how our faith and our abundance interact. Our

Stewardship Team is also clear in this, the ultimate goal of this campaign is to help us grow in our faith.

We chose the theme of *Affirm* because through our stewardship of what God has first given us, we affirm what Jesus said was the greatest commandment- Love God, Love Neighbor. And we remember that our neighbor is the one who is in need. We especially live this out in 2021 as the St. John Church Council has committed us corporately to grow what we share from 4% to up to 6%, with the extra funds going to help feed the hungry through Linn Community Food Bank and shelter the homeless through Matthew 25 Ministries who are restarting a program to help those who cannot afford home repairs.

The goal of our stewardship campaign is to help us grow in our relationship to Jesus through our use of the time, talents, and resources that God has first given us. We invite you into this conversation through our midweek E-News, Facebook, YouTube, and on our website. We do so surrounded by the stories of generosity from those who received an unexpected abundance, inspired by the creativity and joy to be found in that.

A visible sign of that abundance God has shown to us, the love that God hunts us down with, is Communion. A table set before us, even in the presence of those who wish us harm, a table filled to overflowing, the Meal where Jesus shares with us his own self. A visible sign of God's love.

Come, join in this celebration and taste and see this reminder that God is the Shepherd who provides all that we need, who restores our soul, who fills our cup to overflowing, that we might be given the grace to go into this

world and share that cup with those in need- feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering the homeless.

Come my friends- taste and see that the Lord is our Shepherd who pursues us with goodness and lovingkindness. Taste and see and know that we shall never be in want.