

Psalm 23

A sermon for the Season of Lent (Maundy Thursday)

Maundy Thursday marks the beginning of the high holy days which are the center of the Christian year. The word “Maundy” comes from the word “mandated,” that is, we are commanded, or called on, to celebrate this because it is the beginning of the Lord’s Supper. It is “three days” from Thursday night to Sunday morning.

It is a confused time. From the first Sunday in Advent, through Christmas, we’ve been looking forward to these high holy days of the Christian faith. What is this center that we celebrate, which involves betrayal and death? And yes, also resurrection.

Tonight we will look at the Psalm you know best, the Twenty-Third Psalm. It is probably the most well-known portion of the Bible. We know it particularly in the King James Version. We don’t want to look down in any way on the King James Version because it is in many ways the foundation of our English language. But because it is older, its Elizabethan English can lead us astray at certain points.

We know this Psalm is about the Good Shepherd, and then suddenly after fourth verses, without any warning, the setting changes. In the KJV it goes like this:

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

We have learned that with slight variations because that’s the treasure of the King James Version. What surprises us is that it doesn’t have to do with the Good Shepherd. A lot of scholarly efforts have been made to say: “Yes this is still the Good Shepherd, and we are looking at how the Good Shepherd feeds the sheep, anoints them, but then when it comes to the “cup overflowing,” it’s difficult to keep the setting the same. It is pretty well agreed by scholars that first we have the Good Shepherd and how he cares for us, and then the setting changes to a banquet. Not only does the setting change, but there are some words that we can change for the better to understand what it’s about.

When we put verses five and six in present-day English, it helps to bring out the meaning that’s behind the text. In present day English, Psalm 23:5 says: “You prepare a table before me.” That’s either a meal or a banquet.

Then comes: “In the presence of my enemies.” You can get the picture. The enemies are hovering around. This reminds us of the fourth verse: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death [or of deep darkness],” but it includes more than that. The words include all the deep darkness that can come upon us. Not only the darkness of our own deaths and the deaths of others but all the losses, all the threats, all the defeats that

are hovering like enemies to get at us. The picture, the setting, is a note of defiance: Lord, you prepare a table before me right in the middle of my enemies, and they can't do anything about it!

It then goes on to say: "You anoint my head with oil." In many ways this is the most confusing, the strangest of the metaphors or pictures here.

We can show what this means when we look at Psalm 133:1, which says: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard . . . running down on the collar of his robes!"

We ask ourselves: What strange custom is this? I would remind you that we have our own strange customs.

Even stranger than that is something that happens today in the United States. After a football game, the players of the winning team dump a huge tub of Gatorade on their coach. Try explaining that to someone not familiar with American sports and customs. It makes no sense whatsoever. To us it's a way of celebrating, and it helps us understand what is meant by: "You anoint my head with oil."

What kind of oil did they use? It could be regular olive oil or oil that has been perfumed with cinnamon or myrrh. In a desert-like climate it is not surprising that someone could be anointed with perfumed oil as a way of welcoming them to a banquet. It actually talks about that in that well-known account of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50), in which Jesus says to the Pharisee who invited him for dinner: "You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment [perfumed oil]" (Luke 7:46).

Then Psalm 23 says: "My cup overflows." This reminds us of the first verse: "I shall lack nothing." It's like Luke 6:38 which says that the blessing of the Lord, "pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap." And Ephesians 3:20: "Exceedingly, abundantly, beyond all that we can ask or think."

"My cup overflows" means the Lord provides superabundantly. Then it goes on to say, using an alternative translation: "only goodness and steadfast love shall follow me." You'll notice this is a little different from the King James Version, which says: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me. . . ." "Surely" can be misunderstood. "Surely" could mean: "Well, I hope so." The proper meaning is "only": "Only goodness . . . will follow me . . ."

Then comes the strange slip by the King James Version: It uses the word "mercy" instead of "steadfast love." In all of the Psalms we've looked at this season of Lent, except this one, we have found the term "steadfast love," that covenant love, the electing love which does not change. The better translation of verse 6 is: "Only goodness and steadfast love . . ."

“Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me,” not “follow me.” We know that the original Hebrew says “follow,” and yet the context requires that we not think of this like something that comes behind, some kind of thing that is dragged along, or follows that way. No, the context is over against those enemies that hovering around, surrounding us, God’s goodness and steadfast love is surrounding us and pursuing us.

It goes on to say: “All the days of my life.” There’s a direct connection here between Psalm 23 and the great Psalm 139. In 139:7-10 it says: “Where shall I go to escape your Spirit? If I go to the highest heaven, you are there! If I go to the depths of Sheol [which is death itself], you are there! If I go to the furthest distance from the morning or the greatest depths of the sea, even there you are and your right hand shall hold me.”

That’s the same message: “Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me, shall hold me, all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord.” The house of the Lord is not a synagogue; it is the temple where God is and where one finds refuge. “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Actually, in Hebrew it says, “as long as I shall live.” Why then do we say forever?

Again, we find help in Psalm 139, this time, in verse 18. There is a tiny footnote which gives this translation: “Even if I come to the end of my days, you are there.” Because it is the house of the Lord, he is there now and forever with me.

How does this then work out for those of us who are in the New Covenant, in the steadfast love that has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ?

You may recall in Revelation 21:22 where there is an image of the New Jerusalem, it says; “There’s no temple.” There’s no temple because the temple is Jesus Christ. (Rev. 21:22: “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”)

We are helped in understanding this by recalling that controversy in John 2:19-22, where Jesus says to the Jewish leaders: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will build it up.” And they say: “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?” Then it says (paraphrase): After the resurrection, his disciples realized that he had been speaking about his body (John 2:22).

In the New Testament the temple not a building in a particular place; it is Jesus Christ himself. He is the new temple. And the table which he prepares is the table of the Lord’s Supper we are now going to gather round and celebrate. At this table he himself is living and present. He is present through his word, through the wine and the bread. He is present in a way we can see, we can touch, we can taste. He is truly present among us. Paul spells that out in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17:

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

Finally, Psalm 23 ends with “forever.” Just like the end of Matthew’s Gospel, where it says; “. . . lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt 28:20).

That’s the same ending in other words as Psalm 23. The Hebrew for “I will be with you always,” if you translate it backward, is “Immanuel, God with us.” That’s what the new temple and his body is all about. It says: “forever,” always, because this is the Lord’s doing, and the Lord is the one who is with us now and forever. Amen