

Lent 4, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Last night

I had dinner with a new family to our church.

They have a sweet baby, Hunter,

who will be baptized here in April;

he's one of those babies

who seems to always have a smile,

except when his new teeth

are pushing through his gums.

And last night was one of those times - in between the smiles

he was clearly uncomfortable -

and he kept reaching for a bottle of water that was on the kitchen bench,

I guess, in his mind,

associating it

with his bottle

and the comfort that brings.

There are all sorts of things that bring us comfort.

Some of them date back to our childhood -

the taste of milk and cookies,

the scent of the perfume our grandmother wore,

the sound of rain outside when we are safely curled up in bed.

Others have more to do with experiences as we get older -

the smell of coffee brewing,

the feel of a beloved pet's fur,

even the rich earthiness of the first spring rains

as they soak into the recently unfrozen ground.

And here in church

we have our own sources of comfort.

A familiar hymn.

That churchy smell of wood and brass polish

tinged with dust and incense.

Words that have echoed through the centuries.

And today our psalm

is one of those traditional sources of comfort.

Psalm 23, though most of us probably still know the seventeenth century rendering of it better than the translation we had today.

The Lord is my shepherd;
 I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul:
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's 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 anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The words are familiar;
 we hear it most often
 at funerals,
 as we did
 just this week
 at the funeral
 of Marge Kreussling.
 But funerals aren't the only time
 that we read
 this psalm.
 It will come up again
 in a few weeks, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, the Sunday traditionally known
 as Good Shepherd
 Sunday.
 And here, this Sunday,
 the fourth Sunday in Lent,
 traditionally known as Laetare Sunday,
 the Sunday when the traditional introit for the service
 begins with the word, laetare, rejoice!
 when, if we had them, we could use rose colored vestments and hangings,
 when there is a brief pause
 in the solemnity
 of Lent.

Each time we read this psalm
 it sounds different,
 each different context
 leads us to focus
 on different things.

And here, in this season of Lent
we read it in the knowledge
that in two short weeks
we will begin that holiest of weeks,
we will begin that inevitable journey
from the adulation
of Palm Sunday
to the devastation
of Good Friday.

And on Good Friday
we will hear those agonized words from the cross,
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Those words come
from psalm 22,
the psalm immediately before
our psalm today,
a psalm that speaks of the desolation
of feeling abandoned
by God.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” cries the psalmist,
“Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.”

And the psalm continues,
struggling between the knowledge of the way God has acted to save his people throughout
history
and the fear
that God will not save him.
Eventually that psalm reaches
a kind of resolution,
a statement of faith
that feels like almost a second psalm,
stating that God has indeed finally rescued the psalmist,
and that all people
will come to worship God.

But what is not resolved
is the anguish.

Because in second half of psalm 22,
the psalmist says all the right things,
but there is nothing to match the emotion, the pain, the passion of the first part of the psalm.

It sounds all too easy.

Until you get to Psalm 23.

And it's as if
it's a kind of answer
to Psalm 22.

We don't know
if that's how it came about,
if the two psalms
always
belonged together.

But we do know
that
whenever the psalms came together
as a distinct collection
these two psalms
were placed side by side.
They belong to each other, even if not originally,
they belong together
as a kind of call and response.

To the desolation of psalm 22
we hear the comfort
of psalm 23.

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.

Most of us
don't have much experience of shepherds, at least not directly.
Our images are built up from movies
and Sunday school pictures, and, of course, by the Good Shepherd window
that we have right here.
And most of the pictures we see, just like in our window,
are of someone with their sheep
in a green and pleasant land.

But most of the promised land of the people of God
was not so green and pleasant.
Up in Galilee
there were marshy patches;

down south, desert;
and everywhere rocks and precipices.

You can still see the shepherds herding their sheep
in the time honored way
on the hills along the road from Jericho to Jerusalem
and in the valley below Beit Sahour,
the traditional site of the shepherds fields
where the shepherds camped out in caves,
perhaps even bringing their sheep in with them.
It's not an easy life, for the shepherds
or the sheep.

Grass is hard to find;
you have to search for the patches
tucked in the shade of rocky outcrops,
and watch for the telltale shadows of green
in stony crevasses
that may indicate
a spring of water.

Green pastures
are something to dream of,
and the still pools
that indicate
a permanent water source great enough
to counter desert sun
evaporation.

And sheep are not as docile
as you might believe.
Yes, they tend to follow
one after another.
But there's always the one
who breaks away from the others, that goes exploring
or simply wanders off
back where they came from.
And they aren't too smart,
so if one strays into danger,
the others will likely follow.
The shepherd
has to keep watch, and sometimes even go hunting for the lost one,
hopefully leaving the others

somewhere safe.

It's not such a flattering picture,
is it?

If the Lord is our shepherd,
we are the sheep.

Sometimes
not so smart,
going our own way,
straying into danger,
but always dependent
on the one who cares for us,
who will come after us when we stray,
and the rest of the time will, if we trust him,
lead us to places where we can be fed and rested and refreshed.

To the one who cries,
“has God abandoned me?”
the answer is no.
We have a shepherd,
a loving good shepherd, and indeed,
that good shepherd is the very one who cried those words of abandonment,
who knows what it is to be alone and in pain, Jesus Christ our Lord,
and comes
to care for us.

No wonder the psalmist says
that “He revives my soul
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

That care
is not simply
physical,
in fact,
the psalmist is pointing out to us
that this whole shepherd thing
is a metaphor
and the care that the Good Shepherd offers us
is care for our souls.

But the soul
in biblical terms
is not just something religious.
It is the very core of a person;
it's almost always referred to
alongside minds and hearts and strength.
God is with us;
God revives us,
God renews us.

God leads us
on ways that are safe,
safe not, perhaps, necessarily, for our bodies -
there are few promises in Scripture
that God will make us wealthy
or comfortable, and Jesus himself
had nowhere to lay his head,
and following God
can be a risky business -
but God in Christ will lead us in this journey of faith and life
along pathways that are safe,
God will lead us
through times that are difficult
and challenging
and even fearful,
but God will not let evil
overcome us.
Christ has
in those God-forsaken hours on the cross
and in the tomb
and then
in the God-blessed eternity
of resurrection
dealt with evil
conclusively, decisively, irrevocably.

And then we have the promise,
the promise
that we reach for,
the promise that belongs
not to this season of Lent
but to Easter,

the Easter that we celebrate,
even now,
every Sunday
a celebration
of the resurrection.

5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those
who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.

6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the
days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Comfort.
Safety.
Promise.

The Lord is my shepherd.
I shall not want.