

## **Bearing Witness**

A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

*April 29, 2007*

Psalm 23, John 10:22-30

Psalm 23 is perhaps the most familiar scripture in the world. It is a beautiful piece of literature that most of us can recite for memory. It holds us like a special dinner guest where we are entreated to God's hospitality and love. It reminds us that we are at home with God, as God – like a good shepherd - provides food, drink, and protective shelter for the sheep. That God sets a table for us – even in the presence of our enemies – even in the midst of the hardest times – God sets a table for us and provides what we need. This is God's gift to us. That we shall not want.

We bear witness to this good news. God provides all we need.

And yet, we live in a culture that tells us that we should always want more. We should expect the very best. We should never settle for a little when we can have a lot. There is never enough – and we should get all we can for ourselves. Our culture sets up a competitive atmosphere that makes us think about our neighbor – and pushes us, often unconsciously, to have more than they have. This spirit of never having enough drives our economy, drives our desires, drives our lives.

Thursday evening, after having spent some time walking around downtown, I went back to where I had parked the van. As I approached, I clicked the key opener, and got in the front seat. I sat down in the driver's seat and then noticed the ticket on the front windshield. I immediately began to feel frustrated –because I knew I had put in enough money to be paid up through 6pm. I reached out and got the ticket off the windshield – and read that the ticket had been left at 5pm. Well, I knew for sure that I had paid enough money to be paid up past 5pm – I had arrived about 4:30 – but I didn't know how to prove this. I placed the ticket in the seat beside me – and as I did I became aware that the driver's seat was closer to the steering wheel than is comfortable for me – which was odd since I was the one who had driven it downtown earlier. And I noticed a blue parking garage ticket on the dash – wondering where I had picked that up along the way. Then I noticed a novel that I was not reading in the floor in front of the passenger front seat.

That is when it struck me. I looked around and noticed all sorts of things that were not mine– and I realized I was in someone else's life. It looked like our van from the outside. Same color. Same brand of vehicle. But on the inside it was filled with someone else's stuff.

It was a bit strange. First I was trying to figure out what to do with a parking ticket that I didn't deserve. And then I realized I was sitting in someone else's van, and could be accused of trying to steal things or even steal the van. It was very strange. I collected my book bag, I gladly put the parking ticket back on the front of the windshield for someone else to pay, I got out of the van and locked the door.

Looked the same on the outside – but was different on the inside. That is the distinguishing characteristic for those of us under God's care. We bear witness to our truth that life is different because we understand that we are not alone, that we already have all we need, we are not driven to have more than enough, we are cared for and provided for by the One who knows us and loves us best. And that changes who we are in the world, how we interact with the world, what is important to us. We are carried by a deep affirmation from God that we are good, that we are blessed, that we are loved. No matter what happens to us. No matter what life brings us. We are at home in God's fold. We are part of the community of God's people.

We are comforted by the psalm because we often feel lost and afraid in a culture that tells us over and over again that we are not good enough, that we need to look better, that we need to eat better, that we need to make better grades, we need to make more money. We need to be better.

This psalm has a way of comforting our tired spirits, of reminding us that we are at home because God is the one setting the table, God is the one making up the guest list. And your name is included. And so is mine. And so is everyone's.

We bear witness to this good news. We recite the psalm in times that are stressful. It is our prayer. It is our affirmation of faith. It is good to know it by heart – to carry it with us – it reminds us of who we are on the inside whatever it is that is happening on the outside.

But this isn't a personal, feel good message. And to have everything we need is not to have all we want. There is a political dimension to this psalm. Historically, there is a political dimension. The shepherd is a metaphor for God, but also for the leader. There was an expectation that the leader of the people – the king or ruler, the president or governor or the city council – would make sure that all in the community had what they needed. That the basic needs would be provided. That in fact the leader would come looking for those who were lost and no longer had the protection of the community. And for awhile, this image became the leading expectation for the coming Messiah. The people were looking for the Good Shepherd.

But over the years – as the people waited - the expectations became more and more. This Messiah would be a ruler who would come with military might to win back our ways. This Messiah would restore Israel to their previous glory. This Messiah would put Israel back on top and in power.

In John's gospel, Jesus accepts the title of Messiah – unlike in the synoptic gospels. But Jesus does not accept the expectation that the Messiah will be all these things. Jesus knew that the most important role of Messiah was to be the Good Shepherd – to know the people by heart, to be in relationship with the people, to lead them well. Not to overcome and defeat others. But to lead them well. Jesus modeled the image of Psalm 23 – that God provides all we need. That our energy and stress need not be about having more, being more, living up to someone's external standard. The model is that we are already well cared for – whatever else we might have. God has given us all we need. We know this on the inside – and we are invited to live it on the outside.

Jesus shows us a way that embodies our doing as he does. That we are responsible with the leader for providing the basic needs for all in the community. Jesus transcends and transforms the old expectations and lives out this affirmation in the psalm from the heart of Jewish theology. What God provides is enough for all of us.

To live the good news of Psalm 23 is to become a transformed person. It is to bear witness to the truth that says we don't only trust God when all is well and we have all we want – but we trust God whatever our reality and situation. It's about what is on the inside. To follow Jesus, to be in the fold of the Good Shepherd, is to know the voice of the One who loves us best and calls us to be part of a radical transformation of the world. We move from fear to love, from a need for more - to a gratitude for all we have, from an awareness of only what I want - to an awareness of what others around me also need.

This is a resurrection story.  
This is living from death to life.  
This is bearing witness to hope and faith.  
This is the heart of grace.

I am grateful that we have this psalm to comfort us when we are lost from our own lives. When we need to remember that God loves us. But let us also be attentive to the political implications of this psalm – that we are the community that bears witness to the basic affirmation of faith – that like the people in the wilderness who were hungry, God provides sustenance. Like the people who are enslaved in Egypt, God provides freedom from oppression. At first it is a story, a vision. But it grows as more people give themselves to God's possibility. As more people ground themselves in the affirmation that God is indeed God. And we see that such love must be applied not just to our personal lives, but to the systems of our lives. In God's fold, there are no rich and poor sheep. There are no sheep that don't have what they need. We are invited to help create a community in which there are no people who are doing without the basic necessities of protective shelter, food, and drink.

Some years ago William Sloan Coffin said in an essay on public morality entitled *The Politics of Compassion*, “When I read the Bible, I find that the poor are never the problem. It’s always the rich who are a problem to the poor, as Oscar Romero, the martyred monsignor of El Salvador, recognized so movingly. Never did he call the poor of his country the poor. He called them “those made poor.” ... (We must think about what is inside of us as our leaders have so often of late) filled the rich with more good things while sending the poor away empty. “Why, the way we are cutting taxes for the wealthy and social programs for the poor, you’d think the greedy were needy and the needy were greedy.” ... He goes on to say: “Jesus subverted the conventional religious wisdom of his time. I think we have to do the same. ... Good evangelism is not proselytizing but witnessing, bearing witness to “the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it, bearing witness to the love that shines in every heart, deny it or suppress it as we will; and bearing witness to our version of the truth just as the other side witnesses to its version of the truth – for let’s face it, truth in its pure essence eludes us all.” (*The Heart is a Little to the Left*, pp. 9-25)

I have been troubled lately with issues in our city and country. For sure about the war. But also about the question of immigration policies. There is several marches on Tuesday for justice for immigrants. Christians for United Community want us to know about this and invites us to join them. We have watched as big box stores come in and displace people who live in trailers. And we watch as expensive developments attract more people of wealth to our area – and I wonder if these people will honor and value the diversity of all of us here.

And the question of who the public is – which part of the public is allowed in our public spaces, and what can they do in those spaces, and who gets to decide. This is in part the question for discussion about the use of Pritchard Park. It is an important conversation, and one that we must engage faithfully and listen to each other well. And we must remember that we have what we need – especially those of us who already have so much. We must remember to make room for those who still need more to have the basics.

I love this city. I grew up here. I love our diversity. I love our mountains. I love that we can have it all here in one place. But I believe the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm calls us to live with confidence the faith that we know holds us and all people. I ask you to be part of the conversation. To help think about what kind of public we want. What kind of community we want. I don’t know the answers. I only know that I feel afraid when we begin to too narrowly define who the public is and is not. I trust we can work together –that all our truths can help us find a good truth for our community. Just so long as the bottom line is that everyone has what they need. And that not just one group has the power to define that.

We bear witness to the story that God cares for all of us, that God calls all of us to make sure that everyone has what they need, that we are the bearers of the story and the grace. Let us bear witness well. Amen.