

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017
Barbara Marshall

Psalm 23 I Peter 2: 19-25 Acts 2:42-47 John 10:1-10

The 23rd Psalm is one of the most powerful pieces of writing and one of the best known Psalms. King David is believed to have been the writer. In fact, it is often referred to as A Psalm of David.

I discovered while preparing this sermon that Psalm 23 is a psalm of trust. God's love will pursue us.

The word Shepherd was a royal title in the ancient Near East, and it was the responsibility of kings to provide for their people. God's provisions are listed in Psalm 23.

The central verses speak of an intimate presence suggesting no threat is so great as to fear. The rod designates a shepherd's piece of equipment, but is also denotes royal authority. The image then shifts to a gracious host who provides as did the shepherd – food, drink, and protection. Hospitality abounds. Abundant life is attributed to God's goodness.

So while the Psalm is frequently recited at funerals, it offers hope and reassurance every day. It is very meaningful in relation to our individual lives.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD – Jesus is described as the Good Shepherd who laid down His life to become the very source of life for his people. God's love pursues us.

I SHALL NOT BE IN WANT – That's faith and trust and affirms that God has made complete provision. We are blessed with every modern convenience and blessing that makes life easier.

HE MAKES ME LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES – God as made provision for us to obtain food.
AND LEADS ME BESIDE THE STILL WATERS– Two thoughts come to mind. First, that's drink! There is no life without water. Secondly, in life's

storms water can be turbulent. We can turn to God for calmness in our hearts.

HE REVIVES MY SOUL – That's healing!

HE GUIDES ME ALONG RIGHT PATHWAYS – The result if guidance and life.

FOR HIS NAME'S SAKE – That's purpose! We ask God to help us focus on the things that really matter and for the people that help make them matter.

THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH – Comfort comes when we know that rest and peace will be ours with The Shepherd.

I SHALL FEAR NO EVIL – That's protection! Remember the story about the terrified apostles who were relieved and astonished when Jesus stood in the prow of a boat during a storm. He calmed the seas and sky. What a memorable biblical miracle, certainly, but a perfect metaphor as well.

FOR YOU ARE WITH ME; YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF, THEY COMFORT ME - That's trusting and believing. The God of holy mystery is near.

YOU SPREAD A TABLE BEFORE ME IN THE PRESENCE OF THOSE WHO TROUBLE ME– God often meets us around a table – dinner tables, breakfast nooks, lunch counters, conference tables, and the altar. Here at St. Patrick's we have a 6 P.M. service referred to as The Table. The table invites all to come and see and take a seat. God meets us and breaks bread among us. That gives us hope when our spirits ache.

YOU HAVE ANOINTED MY HEAD WITH OIL – That's Consecration. Hospitality abound as signified by the anointing of oil that was used at our Baptism and perhaps during our struggles with an illness. For those nearing death, oil is used during the administration of last rites.

AND MY CUP RUN IS RUNNING OVER. SURELY YOUR GOODNESS AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE – That's Blessings! Birds singing! Flowers in bloom! Fresh air and sunshine!

Majestic mountains! Family and friends! These are just a few of the many gifts Our Shepherd lavishes on us.

AND I WILL DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD FOR EVER – That's security! That's Eternity. Jesus prepared the way and will receive us with open, loving arms when we enter through the doorway to Heaven.

~~~

During our earthly life, we pass through a great many doors.

The open door welcomes; it ushers in fresh air and light. Yes, we're open, come on in, welcome! The open door is the sure sign that we belong, that we have a place; that we are among those who love us.

The closed door shelters and protects us from the winter cold – as well as from the intruder, the thief, evil-doers. Come in out of the cold, you're safe here, everything's fine. Behind the closed door we are safe and held close.

In any new construction, architects spend a great deal of time and money designing the entry. The size and colors of portals and thresholds convey to the visitor authority, majesty, mystery, stature. Passing through doors can intrigue us, excite us, inspire us, fill us with awe or anxiety. Locked doors can be signs of defeat, rejection, desperation.

Doors can speak for us as well. They can be slammed in anger. They can be opened in an act of compassion. In the corporate world, just having a door indicates your place in the organization. And in every community the real power rests with the one who has the key to the door.

The doors we pass through are transitions from fear to sanctuary, from isolation to community, from struggle to peace.

The church door welcomes us into God's presence.

The courthouse door can be the entry way for establishing justice and protecting the common good. And for some the courthouse door can be intimidating and frightening.

The university door is the threshold of learning and discovery.

Our own front door is the blessed assurance that we are home.

In today's Gospel, Jesus, our Shepherd, calls himself the "gate," the entry way, for us to God, the "door" through which we step from reality of our imperfect, incomplete world to the reality of the perfect holiness of God. In this Easter season, God invites us, the sheep, to pass through the threshold that is the Risen Christ.

Do you know that a shepherd carries a bag of small stones with him? He walks behind the sheep, and when one strays from the herd, he throws a stone to hit it in the heel to keep it in line and to keep it moving.

Would we be willing to let Jesus, Our Shepherd, aim a stone at our heel to keep us on track as we enter the door He is opening for us to follow?

(I will drop a small stone into a metal bowl which will be on the pulpit. The ping should be heard because of the microphone. Then I will say....)

That stone is for you and me. What is Jesus, Our Shepherd, asking each of us to do?

Sources for this sermon:

- Connections for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2012 and Homily points for May 7, 2017
- Several Daily Guideposts Resources for 2011, 2014 and 2017
- The Access Bible – New Revised Standard Version published by Oxford University Press
- The New Interpreters Study Bible
- Forward Day by Day for May 7, 2017