Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 7, 2017

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PSALM 23 Acts 2:42–47

Psalm 23

It would be presumptuous for any preacher to think that he or she might have something new to say about the Twenty-Third Psalm. This psalm is so well known and so beloved by so many people that it might be unwise to say anything at all about it. Next to the Lord’s Prayer, there is no portion of scripture more memorized than the words of Psalm 23. Even those who have not been in church for years find themselves remembering many or most of the words when invited to recite it perhaps at the bedside of a dying family member.

But preachers are known to be unwise, and so I will venture to say something about this psalm this morning as long as you do not expect me to say anything that most of you do not already know. Why Psalm 23 is so beloved is not difficult to understand. It is perhaps the most profound testimony of faith to be found in the entire Bible. The speaker, the “I” of the psalm places complete and utter faith in Jahweh as protector, provider, and guide. This faith in Jahweh has been nurtured not when everything has been sweetness and light but in the valley of the shadow of death. We get the impression that the one who speaks these words has come through a very dark and fearful time in the course of life and now realizes that it was Jahweh who was the One who was present to protect and comfort and feed.

Protection, comfort, being fed—these are the nurturing, feminine aspects of Jahweh’s being and character. Realizing this led Bobby McFerrin to compose the lyrics and music of his 23rd Psalm. The music of this piece of music is in the form of an Anglican chant, and the words are as follows:

*The Lord is my Shepherd, I have all I need,*

*She makes me lie down in green meadows,*

*Beside the still waters, She will lead.*

*She restores my soul, She rights my wrongs,*

*She leads me in a path of good things,*

*And fills my heart with songs.*

*Even though I walk, through a dark & dreary land,*

*There is nothing that can shake me,*

*She has said She won't forsake me,*

*I'm in her hand.*

*She sets a table before me, in the presence of my foes,*

*She anoints my head with oil,*

*And my cup overflows.*

*Surely, surely goodness & kindness will follow me,*

*All the days of my life,*

*And I will live in her house,*

*Forever, forever & ever.*

*Glory be to our Mother, & Daughter,*

*And to the Holy of Holies,*

*As it was in the beginning, is now & ever shall be,*

*World without end. Amen.*

Bobby McFerrin’s rendition of the psalm is written completely in the third person. But notice that the psalm, in its original form, moves from the third person to the second person. Because the Psalmist has had to walk along life’s journey through a valley of shadows and death, and has come through the valley to other side safe and sound, the Psalmist now realizes that it is Jahweh who was there to protect and comfort and feed. The Psalmist is therefore led to address Jahweh directly and personally in the second person as “You, as “Thou.”

*Even though I walk through the valley*

*of the shadow of death,*

*I 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 my enemies;*

*thou anointest my head with oil,*

*my cup overflows.*

Walter Brueggemann, the teacher of the Hebrew scriptures, says that this is the core experience of the Psalmist. It is from this transforming experience that the Psalmist declares in the presence of all who may be listening:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;*

*he makes me lie down in green pastures.*

*He leads me beside still waters;*

*he restores my soul,*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness*

*for his name’s sake.*

The Psalmist is like a sheep who is being cared for completely and totally by a loving shepherd. I say “completely and totally” because this psalm is not just a spiritual expression of the Psalmist about God as the keeper of one’s soul. Here, there is no separation between soul and body. There are too many material images – pasture, water, table, food, oil – to make such a separation. Jahweh is not just the Shepherd of the Psalmist’s soul; God provides for the bodily needs of the Psalmist as well. This is the truth that the Israelites learned when they were fed manna in the wilderness. This is what Elijah learned when he was fed by the widow of Zarephath. This is what the 5,000 learned when they were fed through Jesus’s blessing of two fish and five loaves of bread.

It kind of makes us wonder why some would say, “I am a spiritual person.” Are we not both soul and body? Can we not say, “I am trying to be a faithful human being, a whole person, a person God has created and is creating me to be, both soul and body?” And when we care for others, should we not care for them, both soul and body?” After all, Jahweh looks after us, both soul and body.

But the phrase from Psalm 23 that made the biggest impression on me this week is the first verse: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” I like the New English Bible translation of this verse, “The Lord is my shepherd, *I shall want nothing.*” “I shall want nothing.” This declaration is the consumer market economy’s nightmare! For our consumer culture thrives not on our needs but on our wants, and when we say that Jahweh is our shepherd and that we shall *want nothing*, it means that we have been set free from all of our wants.

Now, I know that the past was not all good. In the small town culture into which I was born and in which I was raised, there were many things about it that were harmful. There was far too much judgment against those who looked or thought differently from the accepted norm. There was far too much secrecy. The morality was far too narrow. But there was something good about that culture. We were focused on needs rather than wants. We were happy to have enough food on the table, a warm house in winter, a bed to sleep on, the care and nurture of loving parents, carefree play with our friends after school, time spent with Dad as he fished for salmon. We came very close to the Psalmist who declares, “Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall want nothing.”

That has all changed and not for the better. Now we are encouraged to satisfy our wants, which we mistakenly call our needs. We think we need all that the consumer culture provides. The result is that we have lost sight of the basics of life, which Jahweh is ready to supply. On the human side we are losing the art of sharing, a commitment to the common good, and the vision of the day when sharing by all will mean scarcity for none. Human sharing comes from a faith that God will provide.

In the rural church I served in Nova Scotia during a summer while in seminary, there was a family named MacIntosh. It consisted of a single mother with ten children. This family did not have two cents to rub together, but they had enough food and a warm house, crowded and rundown as it was. The members of the church provided all that they needed. The MacIntosh’s and those who cared for them knew and lived the truth of Psalm 23. Yahweh was their shepherd; they wanted nothing. They lived the vision of a world in which sharing by all will mean scarcity for none. They lived as did the early Christian community when they sold all that they had, put the proceeds in a common treasury, and gave to each according to his or her need.

We long for such a faith in God and for such a world in which no man, woman, or child ever need be without food and shelter and, in light of what happened in Washington this past week, health care. May the Twenty-Third Psalm become our testimony of faith in God’s sure provisions for our souls and our bodies, and may it inspire us to a greater sharing among ourselves and with the world, and a more faithful witness and mission. So shall goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives. So shall we dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.