

"I FEAR NO EVIL"

The SERMON for 4.17.05, Fourth Sunday in Easter,
"Good Shepherd Sunday" +++ The Ecumenical Lections:
Acts 2.42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2.19-25; John 10.1-11

Did you memorize the 23rd Psalm when you were a child? If so, it almost certainly was in the King James Version, which we used responsively not many minutes ago. Now, I can say with confidence that if you didn't memorize this the most familiar psalm, you didn't memorize any other. So this is a test to those who did memorize Psalm 23. (Loree & I laugh when I say to her "This is a test"--as I was, in college, her major professor in religion & philosophy.) This is a test as to whether you remember the 23rd Psalm well enough to quote it. You do, if you've used it through subsequent years for prayer & meditation.

Let's get practical about this, about memorizing & using the 23rd Psalm. Another psalmist, the one who wrote Psalm 119, said (vs.11) "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee": memorizing great scriptures & hymns is an enrichment of your inner life, a self-gift of peace & joy, a deposit on which one can draw when one or another is in need. When she was just my present age, my mother put off dying for two days until I could reach her. When I walked into the room where her other children were gathered, she smiled & said the last word she ever said on earth. It was her pet name for me, & it would embarrass me to tell you what it was. I said, "Mama, would you like me to recite the 23rd Psalm?" She smiled & nodded & peacefully died before I finished the recitation. (I think she died right after I quoted "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." The memory of that moment explains the title of this sermon, which came to me as the memory of my deeply Christian mother's peaceful death merged with the news of the death of a deeply Christian pope, John Paul II.) When as a child I memorized Psalm 23, I wasn't thinking that it would ever have any practical value--certainly not in helping my mother to die, & helping her children to live enriched by her dying, which also enriched for me the 23rd Psalm: I can never think of it without a renewal of the blessing of her living & dying for her children.

OK, now this is a test. We're going to recite/read the 23rd Psalm--recite it from memory, or read it beginning toward the bottom of page 30 in our Book of Worship. When I raise my hands from the Bible, we'll say a line together & then I'll drop my hands for silent meditation; when I raise my hands, we'll say the next line--& so forth through the psalm. And don't be embarrassed if you get stuck & have to look; I don't have to in private, but may have to in public. Here we go:"The Lord is my shepherd...."

Did you notice, in your bulletin, that today is "Good Shepherd Sunday"? The scriptures I read are being read this morning in thousands of Catholic & Protestant churches. They are on the theme of "Gathered in Christ," the Christian community everywhere as the flock of Christ the good shepherd, of whom we heard in the last reading (Jn.10.1-11). "The sheep follow him because they know his voice." Jesus says "I am the gate for the sheep;...whoever enters [the sheepfold] by me will be saved....I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The 10th chapter of the Gospel of John is the NT's main response to the OT's 23rd Psalm. That was our 4th reading....Our 3rd was 1 Peter 2.19-25: Jesus is the shepherd who suffered death to deliver us from our sins, & we are to "follow in his steps...For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls"--a passage reminiscent of Luke 15.1-7: Finding his lost sheep, a shepherd "calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'" After telling this parable, our Lord speaks of the "joy in heaven over one sinner who repents."...Our 1st reading was Acts 2.42-47, our earliest picture of the earliest Christian community, which met regularly to praise God, rejoice together in his presence, learn more of his purpose, seek his guidance, take a collection to meet basic human needs, & welcome newcomers to salvation in Jesus Christ the Lord....Which brings us to our 2nd reading, which was Psalm 23. For the rest of this sermon, please look at some version of it: the KJV in our Book of Worship, the NRSV in your pew Bible, or other. I'll use my own translation-paraphrase:

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1 Our LORD is my shepherd. The psalm's 1st word is neither about God in general nor about one's own personal God: the word is God's name for himself-in-relation-to the community worshiping; & members of the worshiping community, in using his name, are affirming the community even when professing personal allegiance to him: in the Bible, God can be my shepherd only for those who, by regular church-going, thank & praise & serve him as our God (to represent Yahweh, the Bible uses, & capitalizes, LORD). The Bible has no use, no place, for a private religiosity, a "spirituality," apart from what increasing numbers of folk look down on as "organized religion.".....I lack nothing (a sheep needs). Now, if a sheep lacked something, what would it be: food or water or guidance or protection. This sheep, the psalmist, isn't praying for anything for himself: he can't think of anything he needs that he doesn't have; & in the next two verses, he lists the shepherd's supplies to him: **2 He lets me stop to rest in patches of green grass and leads me to still pools and slow-moving streams (3) and so refreshes me. For my good and his glory, he guides me along the right paths.**

So far, through half of its verses, Psalm 23 is witness, a testimony of trust. The mood is "quietness and confidence," which God told Isaiah (30.15) the faithful are to have--& which they cannot have when they put their trust elsewhere than in the LORD. Verses 1-3 cover 3 of the sheep's needs: food, water, guidance. Now, as we move into the 4th need--protection--we notice the change from God's being talked about (in the third person) to God's being talked to (in the second person): from **he** to **you**.....He's saying "LORD, I need protection from disease & enemies." Sicknes had brought him close to "death," & enemies are close even when he's eating. **4 Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness where death lurks, I fear no evil [the four words of this sermon's title]; for [here we turn from witness to pray-er] you are with me. Your club [to protect me against attacking beasts] and your [long] pole [to warn me when I get too close to the edge of ravines] make me feel safe.**

And now, for the last two verses of the 23rd Psalm, the picture of the LORD as shepherd with his sheep fades out, & we who were sheep whose needs God met find ourselves guests of God our host, who provides all our needs, including protection in his "house" from enemies looking in the windows while we feast & he honors us by pouring drops of oil on our heads and keeping our cups full to the brim! **5 You spread a banquet for me while my enemies are outside looking in.** [The LORD my host provides me not only with food & drink but also with protection from all that threatens my life.] **You treat me as an honored guest and are so eager to please me that the wine spills over when you are filling it to the brim.** With this humorous incident, the prayer of thanksgiving ends. The psalmist wrote the prayer as a thank-you note to God, & put it in the temple prayer-slot, where a priest found it & saved it--for us! Of course the thank-you note to God wasn't complete until the psalmist brought it to church &, as it were, put it in the collection. He didn't go to church to get something out of it, but to give something to someone, to the someone for whom the church exists from here to eternity. And in church he felt pursued not by his enemies but by God's blessing upon him for this life & the next. And so with triumphant joy our psalmist turns from prayer, leaves church, & goes through the week witnessing as if in the words concluding the Lord's Prayer in Matthew (6.13): "For thine be the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." **6 Only goodness and steadfast love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.** Now, the LORD's house is portable. When we leave church, we are supposed to lift it up & carry it with us throughout the week--instead of living the week as though we hadn't been to church. For we are called to live our days in the presence of God & for his purposes, & the point of worship buildings made with hands, & the point of regularly worshiping therein is that we may learn to live in (Hebrews 9.11) a house "not made with hands," eternal in the heart & in the heavens. For this, every Sunday is Easter, resurrection day, when the stone of the week passed can be rolled away, & the LORD can help us prepare ourselves for walking through the new week in resurrection light. For we were not made to live out our lives in the dark valleys of fear & frustration & failure, valley of "the shadow of death," but to walk in the light of the LORD who is our daily & eternal Shepherd & Host. Therefore, let us now enter into the peace & joy of our LORD.