



April 25, 2010 - The Rev. Scott Pittendrigh

Text: Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Resource used: Susan Snook, William F. Brosend, and Dawna Markova

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Homily given at St. John's Cobble Hill ~ Sunday April 25th 2010.

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In the name of the One who is the shepherd and guardian of our souls. Amen.

The Twenty-Third Psalm is of course, one of the most well-known psalms (chapters) in the Bible. Countless people have memorized it, (usually from the King James Version) or have sung it in the Crimmond setting of the hymn as we did this morning:

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 forever.

I read it to you in that version because I think many of us can perhaps recall Sunday-school posters of this favourite psalm (in those words) superimposed on beautiful painted pictures of Jesus on a grassy hillside, with a lamb over his shoulders, rescuing it from danger.

Many children still get great comfort from the image of the kind and gentle Jesus who cares for all God's creatures. This is the Jesus who will stay with a child through a dark night filled with terrors: alligators under the bed and monsters in the closet. This is the Jesus who stays with adults too, through nights of weeping, and loneliness, and worry, and despair.

And in those times of danger and grief, many people do turn to the Twenty-Third Psalm for comfort. I have seen it many times in my work as a priest. At the bedside of people facing surgery or serious illness, reciting the psalm brings peace and hopefulness. At memorial services, it evokes the kind and loving presence of the God who promises an eternal dwelling place in the "house of the Lord forever".

But then, there are the times when events in our lives or in our world throw our peace, our hopefulness, our comfort into doubt – times when the Jesus we remember from our childhood, smiling on that grassy hillside, seems almost irrelevant to the darkness of the world.

Perhaps some of us have experienced times like this whenever we read of terrible crimes committed against innocent people; of the abuse of children; of the long-term abuse of children by clergy; of a



young man shooting thirty-two other people and then himself on the campus of a University; or closer to home, of another young man convicted this week of murdering a first year student at the University of Victoria. How do we make sense of a world in which a young person can be so troubled, so destructive? How do we make sense of a world in which such bright, innocent, promising young lives are tragically and suddenly lost? How do we begin to understand a world where people in Canada, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Darfur, and a thousand other places die regularly and senselessly?

Perhaps the people crowding around Jesus in the Portico of Solomon that day (that we heard about in today's Gospel reading) were asking similar questions about unjust suffering and when it would end. It was the Feast of the Dedication, the feast we now know as Hanukkah, when the people remembered how the nation rededicated the temple after a great leader, Judas Maccabeus, defeated the Greek conquerors in 164 BC. The festival remembered the suffering of the Jewish people under the Greek Empire, and rejoiced at their great victory. Against this background, with Roman soldiers now hovering, and memories of thousands of crucified would-be rebels and other unjust suffering fresh in their minds, people asked Jesus, "Are you the Messiah?" Would Jesus be the new hero, in other words, who would drive out the Roman invader, their current oppressor? Would the nation be free and independent once more?

The people crowding around Jesus want a clear and decisive answer. Instead, he is cryptic and evasive. The people want him to speak with authority about weapons and strategies; instead, he talks about sheep. To their demand that he assume the leadership for which they have been hoping, he answers with a claim of leadership so astounding that many of them pick up stones to kill him on the spot: he claims to be one with God.

This is no gentle, clear-eyed Jesus on a green, rolling hillside; this is a fierce, uncompromising Jesus, a Jesus who refuses to meet any earthly expectations, a Jesus whose frame of reference is so far removed from that of the people around him that it is a wonder he escapes with his life at all. And indeed, John (in this Gospel) tells us that the next time Jesus dares to show his face in Jerusalem, the chief priests cook up a scheme to have him crucified.

How do we reconcile the gentle, kind shepherd Jesus, the one who would go anywhere and risk anything to save even the smallest lamb, with the Jesus who provoked his enemies to violence? And how does this Jesus have anything at all to do with the worries and dangers of our lives? How can our faith in Jesus help us through the tragedies that we witness on an almost daily basis on every evening news cast? What can the gentle shepherd do to help?

You know, the wonderful thing about Psalm 23 is just how realistic it is about the darkness of life. Perhaps the picture we get of the Good Shepherd from art and music and childhood memories is an image of pure light and pure sweetness. But the psalm itself knows darkness and fear.

I read recently about a Christian pastor who after his daily workout in the gym, went to the steam room at the Jewish Community Centre. Not long after he joined the centre his new Jewish friends discovered that he was a minister and they were as curious about his faith as he was about theirs. He said he was acutely aware of one frequent, visible difference between him and his generally older friends: he did not



have numbers tattooed on his arm. So it took him a while to ask these survivors of Nazi work/death camps if the Twenty-Third Psalm was important to them, but he said, he was glad he did. It led to the same kind of recitations, albeit in Hebrew or Yiddish, that one might hear in English at a nursing home or funeral service, he said. It is popular in both faiths – not simply because it is associated with death, but because it is a psalm of deliverance and it puts almost everything in the present tense. It is about the here and now: The Lord is (not was) my shepherd, who leads and restores; I fear no evil; your rod and staff comfort; you prepare and anoint.

Like the writer of the psalm, many Christians have traveled through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. They too have known the threat of the unknown. And yet many have also known the comfort of God's presence, presently walking alongside them through that dark valley.

Many people have felt the exquisite sweetness of Jesus' love surrounding and enfolding them in the most difficult moments of their lives. Many have experienced transcendent holiness and light in the darkest of times.

People who spend much time with those who are ill or bereaved begin to know what kind of help brings true comfort. Comfort does not come from assurances that everything will be all right or from platitudes that try to explain why everything that happens is God's will. Comfort comes from the simple presence of companions who are willing to sit alongside us in our darkest hours, to walk through the darkness with us, to help us make the darkness holy, and to rejoice with us when small glimmers of light finally begin to shine.

In a book called *No Enemies Within*, Dawna Markova writes about her stay in hospital while being treated for cancer. She wrote: "When I was in the hospital, the one person whose presence I welcomed was a woman who came to sweep the floors with a large push broom. She was the only one who didn't stick things in, take things out, or ask stupid questions. For a few minutes each night, this immense Jamaican woman rested her broom against the wall and sank her body into the turquoise plastic chair in my room. All I heard was the sound of her breath in and out, in and out. It was comforting in a strange and simple way. My own breathing calmed. Of the fifty or so people that made contact with me in any given day, she was the only one who wasn't trying to change me...she just looked and saw me. Then she said simply, 'You're more than the sickness in that body.' She continued, 'You're not the fear in that body. You're more than that fear. Float on it. Float above it.....You're more than that pain.'"

"Without any instruction from me, this Jamaican guide had led me to a source of comfort that was wider and deeper than pain or fear. "It's been fifteen years since I've seen the woman with the broom" Markova writes, "I've never been able to find her. No one could remember her name, but she touched my soul with her compassionate presence and her fingerprints are there still."

We need to remember stories like this, because we do have a choice. We can choose to stay stuck in the lament of Jesus' seeming absence—of all that is wrong and broken in this world. But I don't recommend that because without his voice much of life can feel like we are dancing without music.



Or, we can chose to say “yes” to his love, we can be transformed from Sheep into Shepherds. To love as we have been loved. Upheld by his Spirit, we can pitch our tents in the world of paradox and be sent on our way so that others may believe and have fullness of life.

And at the heart of it, that is what our Christian faith can tell us. It tells us that our Shepherd, the One who liberates us, is not the God of light alone. Jesus is with us in the darkness too, because he too has been enfolded by darkness. Like us, he has grieved over the senseless waste and tragedy of life. Like us, he has agonized over those who suffer. As all of us will eventually, he has entered into the darkness of death. And with all of us, he promises to walk that road so that we do not have to walk it alone. [“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”]

The ultimate truth of our Christian faith, the truth we remember this Easter season and every Sunday as we celebrate the Resurrection, is that our Shepherd leads us out of death into life. The One who was crucified and who rose again is the same One who promises to redeem the world, to relieve its suffering, to restore it to wholeness, to inaugurate a new creation. The risen Christ is the sign of the life that God promises to all of us: life transformed, life redeemed, life restored, life abundant, life joyous and eternal and blessed. God prepares a table for all of us: a table brimming with overflowing cups and overabundant blessings. And Jesus, our Great Shepherd, invites us to come and share – so that we can be transformed from Sheep into Shepherds. Amen.

The Woman with the Broom (Full Story):

When I was in the hospital, the one person whose presence I welcomed was a woman who came to sweep the floors with a large push broom. She was the only one who didn't stick things in, take things out, or ask stupid questions. For a few minutes each night, this immense Jamaican woman rested her broom against the wall and sank her body into the turquoise plastic chair in my room. All I heard was the sound of her breath in and out, in and out. It was comforting in a strange and simple way. My own breathing calmed. Of the fifty or so people that made contact with me in any given day, she was the only one who wasn't trying to change me.

One night she reached out and put her hand on the top of my shoulder. I'm not usually comfortable with casual touch, but her hand felt so natural being there. It happened to be one of the few places in my body that didn't hurt. I could have sworn she was saying two words with each breath, one on the inhale, one on the exhale: “As. . . Is. . . As. . . Is. . .”

On her next visit, she looked at me. No evaluation, no trying to figure me out. She just looked and saw me. Then she said simply, “You're more than the sickness in that body.” I was pretty doped up, so I wasn't sure I understood her; but my mind was just too thick to ask questions.

I kept mumbling those words to myself throughout the following day, “I'm more than the sickness in this body. I'm more than the suffering in this body.” I remember her voice clearly. It was rich, deep, full, like maple syrup in the spring. I reached out for her hand. It was cool and dry. I knew she wouldn't let go. She continued, “You're not the fear in that body. You're more than that fear. Float on it. Float above it. You're more than that pain.” I began to breathe a little deeper, as I did when I wanted to float in a lake. I





remembered floating in Lake George when I was five, floating in the Atlantic Ocean at Coney Island when I was seven, floating in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Africa when I was twenty-eight. Without any instruction from me, this Jamaican guide had led me to a source of comfort that was wider and deeper than pain or fear.

It's been fifteen years since I've seen the woman with the broom. I've never been able to find her. No one could remember her name; but she touched my soul with her compassionate presence and her fingerprints are there still.

From No Enemies Within by Dawna Markova

