

4 Lent, Yr. A

March 22, 2020

Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

First, let me thank David Skidmore whose idea this was and whose technological expertise will make it possible. As you probably know, all services have been suspended indefinitely, so we will continue this YouTube Liturgy of the Word for the time being.

Last week I said I believed the scriptures for the day were tailor-made for the current situation and I could say the same again. Today, what I'd like to focus on is the 23rd psalm, but also looking at the readings from Ephesians and from John for context. Both of those have to do with seeing. In Ephesians it is phrased as our call to be children of light, or to wake up. In the John reading, we hear all about blindness, both physical and metaphorical. In the back and forth between the Pharisees and the blind man, he's clear about one thing: he was blind and now he can see. He doesn't know how it happened, he doesn't really know who Jesus is. And the Pharisees in the story refuse to see. John's point is that it's possible to be able to see physically but to still be blind, both to what's before your very eyes, because it conflicts with your ideology, and because seeing this something new that's before you may require that you change.

So, seeing, understanding. What are we being asked to SEE? And here is where the 23rd Psalm comes in. We're used to hearing it several times during the year, but mainly we hear it at funerals. It's a central affirmation of our faith, rather like the sentence from John 3:16 that we talked about a couple of weeks ago. That scripture says that God so loved the world that he sent his son so that we all might be saved. This psalm is equally central. In some ways it says the same thing: that God loves the world, that he loves each of us, that he watches over us through thick and thin and that his goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives until we dwell in the house of the Lord forever. You can see why it's a favorite at funerals. But, as I said, it's also central to how we understand our faith, our lives and our relationship to God here and now.

Let's look at it more closely. It begins by saying that because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. Or, in another translation, I shall lack no good thing. In today's world where we are persuaded and manipulated into thinking we want and need more and more, this is a challenge because it asks us to think about what we really need. You'll remember the story that I told about asking 2nd graders at Good Shepherd to tell me what they needed versus what they wanted. And when they answered, they had the essentials: food, water, a house to live in,

someone to love you. And, of course, one of them added: God. So that's perhaps the first question: what is it that we really need for a good and fulfilled life? Perhaps the silver lining in this current time is that we can stop and really think about that. Because, in a way, given the current threats to health, we're forced to look at what really matters. At what is absolutely essential.

And then there's that paragraph about walking through the valley of the shadow of death. You'll note that the psalmist doesn't say that there is no evil or death, he doesn't deny that there is suffering or that bad things can happen to good people. He doesn't try to explain evil away. What he says is that he won't FEAR that evil. And then in perhaps the most central line he states WHY he doesn't fear evil and it's because, he says to God, YOU ARE WITH ME. We heard that before in Jesus' very name, Emmanuel, GOD WITH US. I think we could safely say that all our faith rests on those two statements: that God so loved the world and that God is with us. We'll have plenty of time for reflection these coming weeks and so that might be a good thing to think about. What does it mean to say that God is with me?

I mentioned last week that the prosperity Gospel has sold folks a bill of goods, telling them that all their dreams and wishes will be granted to them, to say nothing of the fact that there will be no suffering. They are focused on the

short term: I get the beautiful or handsome spouse, or the big house; I'm successful in my job, nobody in my family will get sick. Perhaps that's true, but I truly doubt it. Because God's promises are not about short-term safety, but about ultimate safety. That, too, is what the psalm tells us. In those verses about the banquet, the table that God will spread before us in the presence of our enemies: those enemies of fear and doubt and anxiety and loneliness. It's a picture of lasting safety and abundance: my cup runneth over. It's also a picture of that final homecoming when we dwell in the house of the Lord forever. It reminds us of that passage in Revelation: "Look, here God lives among human beings. He will make his home among them, they will be his people and he will be their God, GOD WITH THEM. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain." (21:3-4) It's ultimate safety and security.

I read a wonderful sermon by Frederick Bueckner which he preached on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of a church in Vermont. He said that in 1831, the congregation caused a new steeple to be erected on the church and a historian of the town wrote that "one agile Lyman Woodard stood on his head in the belfry with his feet toward heaven." Bueckner said he couldn't find anything else out about Mr. Woodard, but he thought it was a risky and

glorious thing to do because, as Christians, our feet ARE indeed headed toward heaven and the world and its values are topsy-turvy, upside down.

A final thought, going back to Ephesians. We are children of light and we're called to live that out. What does that mean? It certainly means at least that we trust God's promises that are found in the psalm. That, when we are freed from fear and we know the presence of God, we can go out into the world as bringers of light. I know that that can sound kind of abstract, but let me close with a simple story that Betsy told me that came from some neighbors of hers. It seems that a little boy in the neighborhood was to celebrate his birthday and, because of all the lockdowns, his party was canceled. He was distraught. So all the neighbors organized and every yard had balloons and big birthday signs for him that he could see as his parents took him through the neighborhood. It seems like a small thing but I don't think it is. It's certainly something he'll remember the rest of his life. In this difficult time, there will be lots of opportunities for us to live confidently as children of light. Keep watch for them. Amen.