

Lent 4A, Hickory Neck Episcopal Church, 30 March 2014  
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen  
1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ps 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

S.D.G.

As a kid I had this wonderful baby sitter. She was not the one you wanted to torment, she was the one you looked forward to, it was great when she came to watch me. One of the special things that she did was to make me toast and tea if I didn't feel well. Yes she gave me, a little kid, tea with milk in it, and two lumps - proper English tea. And the toast was simple. It had butter and a light coating of sugar. Yes, I know caffeine and sugar! But for me this became comfort food. Having tea and toast was like being wrapped in a warm blanket.

Interestingly, toast has now become the new artisanal food. Apparently fancy cup cakes are passé and toast is the new must have delight, at \$4 a slice. I suspect that more people think of mac and cheese, various stews, or chicken noodle soup for their own comfort food; but a cup of tea still works for me. People find comfort in many things, food being only one of them.

For centuries though, the Psalms have both challenged and brought comfort to many. Martin Luther considered that the Psalter "might well be considered a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible." It is said that the Psalms are the meeting place for God's word and man's prayer (Bonhoeffer).

The 23rd Psalm, heard today in the familiar King James English, has brought comfort to countless multitudes. Most clergy or chaplains can tell you stories of being bedside while someone was actively dying and by all appearances unconscious. The family asks for prayers, and when the Lord's Prayer or the 23rd Psalm are said, the previously unresponsive family member joins in knowing all the words. And as the last line is said, they retreat back into quiet solitude. The song of the 23rd Psalm is marked indelibly on our hearts.

I have commented recently that in sermon preparation the psalm is often overlooked, and that should not be misconstrued; it is not a measure of the beauty or value of the Psalter. Rather it is a reflection of the challenge that is presented in trying to explain a complex song in just a few words. The structure of the psalms is important, as is its relation to other psalms. The conversation can all too easily slip into an analysis

requiring white boards and multiple color marking pens; the resulting diagram might look like a cross between an NFL playbook and a Jackson Pollock painting. The 23rd Psalm though is such a part of our worship DNA that it warrants discussion.

“The LORD is my shepherd;” That statement is remarkable for several reasons. First, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was traditionally considered “our” God, it was a corporate acclimation. But this statement makes the LORD personal, “my shepherd”. The LORD is MY shepherd. This song of trust and confidence is a personal song; it is my song, it is your song, together it is our song and prayer.

Secondly, the image of shepherd leads us naturally to our own vision of a shepherd watching over his sheep, and to the vision found in John’s Gospel of Jesus being the “Good Shepherd”. This image reflected the then common metaphor of ‘shepherd’ as referring to ‘God and king’. David, himself a shepherd of the field, along with the kings of Israel were considered shepherds of their people. The LORD watched over the people of Israel, as a shepherd would, during their time in the wilderness and the exile. The role of shepherd, as well as God and king, was to watch over their charge. And in this opening statement I declare that God and king is watching over me.

God cares for me, and for each of us, by nourishing us with ‘green pastures’ and ‘still waters’. On the practical side this referred to a time, during the winter and spring months, when the fields were flourishing and the herds did not need to be moved to seek out food. Nourishment, as well as rest, was available. This is the restorative care that we can find with life in the presence of God. This is our comfort food.

In the middle of this psalm is the line that has always made me chuckle. I understand that my laughter is based upon twisting Elizabethan English into contemporary standards; but, I always thought: YEA, I am going to the beach! I have never considered YEA, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But there is comfort in knowing that even in the valley of the shadow of death my own shepherd is watching over me and caring for me.

Utah has arguably some of the most unique and interesting landscape to be found anywhere. A dear friend described it to me in these terms; he reasoned that after God had created the heavens and the earth that there was stuff left over; strange theology but he continued. God scooped up all of the left over stuff, full of color and texture, and decided to place it in what is now Utah. Bryce, Canyonlands, Arches, Capital Reef, and Zion National Parks all provide the opportunity to be a part of this unique creation. And if

you have the opportunity to hike among the slot canyons found there, you might experience what it is like to be in the valley of the shadow of death. The trails through these canyons are so narrow and long and the rock walls so tall that even at mid-day the sun light can not penetrate to the canyon floor. The temperature is uncharacteristically cool and footsteps echo. It is at such a time that you want to know that your shepherd has a rod to protect you from evil beasts and a staff to guide you to the light of day. Even then, in the claustrophobic echoes of the valley of the shadow of death, you can rest in the verdant pastures and clear waters that the LORD provides.

There is nothing, that can separate you from your shepherd. And as you exit the slot canyons, or the valley of the shadow of death, the light spreads forth and you can exclaim, as did the man blind from birth, "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

And what we see is a banquet prepared for us. The LORD, our shepherd, preparer of our feast is there even as we face adversities. The psalm assures us that even as our enemies and troubles confront us, and are ultimately left behind, the goodness and mercy of our LORD will always be with us in everlasting fellowship. That is comfort food for the soul. A cup of tea and toast to warm our hearts.

And we need this comfort because all too often we feel as though we are alone and not reclining on the green pastures beside still waters but are in the midst of the angst found in the 22nd Psalm. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" Even as we feel that pain, the 22nd psalm moves onward to the worship of the LORD, and then proceeds to the comfort found in the 23rd psalm.

"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") these words spoken by Jesus on the cross before his death so often reflect our own feelings. Our feelings of despair and abandonment. But we must never forget that after the death was the Resurrection; and that the LORD was there the whole time. The shepherd never left his sheep.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."

Amen,