



Liturgical Day: The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Date: October 9, 2005

Sermon Title: I Shall Not Want

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a story from the first century B.C. that may or may not be apocryphal. The story took place when much of the world was unexplored, unknown and largely unmapped. Map makers had to have some way of portraying those areas of the earth that were as yet unexplored, so they symbolized these regions by dragons, monsters and large fish. The message was clear. Uncharted territories were frightening, fearsome places. Terrors lay buried there. But as many maps declared, "There be Treasures" as well.

The story is this: *One commander of a battalion of Roman soldiers was caught up in a battle that took him into the territory that the mapmakers had represented with their monsters and dragons. Not knowing whether to forge ahead into the unknown and pursue the enemy, or turn back into the known, which would effectively be a retreat, he dispatched a messenger to Rome with this urgent request: "Please send new orders. We have marched off the map."*¹

Do you ever feel like that commander? These days we are marching off the map in so many ways. Today we find ourselves in uncharted regions as we march off the technological map, the political map, the economic map, the environmental map, the demographic map or virtually any map you can think of. The pace of change in the past two or three decades has been remarkable. We are now living in a world that most of our parents couldn't ever have imagined. And our children will soon be marching off beyond us, into a world that will be no more familiar to us than our world has been to our parents.

For some, the sense of adventure in this kind of dramatic change is exhilarating. But for many others, change brings uncertainty – and uncertainty can bring fear. It is hard to live, constantly not knowing what might be just around the next corner. When faced with that reality, it is easy to get swallowed up in fear – but this morning's Psalm, the familiar 23rd Psalm, calls us to live with a different mindset.

It is a Psalm traditionally attributed to David, perhaps the greatest king ancient Israel ever knew. David had known times of uncertainty and fear. When he stood, as a young man, in front of the giant warrior Goliath; when he hid in the mountains because King Saul was determined to put David to death; when David's adulterous and murderous misbehavior was revealed by Nathan... in any of these moments, David could easily have given up, and allowed himself to be overcome with fear. But he lived with a different mindset. He lived not with the mindset of fear, but with the mindset of faith. He knew that no matter how dark and how difficult and how frightening the journey became, he would persevere, because he didn't have to go it alone. Instead, he went, accompanied by the God who created him, who called him, and who promised to walk beside him through the best and the worst of what this world had to offer.

Had David been a different kind of person, he might have wished for other means of security. When he looked across the valley at Goliath, he might have wished for an entire platoon of fearless warriors to back him up. When he hid for his life to stay out of the reach of Saul, he might have wished for powerful national leaders who could have argued on his behalf. When his unfaithfulness and deceit were exposed for all to see, he might have wished for a hoard of witnesses to testify about his moral character. Had he been a different kind of person, he might have wished for these sources of security, but he didn't. They weren't needed, because he was a person of faith. They weren't needed because he had God – and God was all the security he needed.

Last week I heard a story about a Sunday School teacher who asked a group of

FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 25:1-9

PSALM

PSALM 23

SECOND LESSON

PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MATTHEW 22:1-14

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY GOD,
SOURCE OF EVERY
BLESSING, YOUR
GENEROUS GOODNESS
COMES TO US ANEW
EVERY DAY. BY THE
WORK OF YOUR SPIRIT
LEAD US TO
ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR
GOODNESS, GIVE
THANKS FOR YOUR
BENEFITS, AND SERVE
YOU IN WILLING
OBEDIENCE; THROUGH
YOUR SON, JESUS
CHRIST OUR LORD.
AMEN.**

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young students if any of them could quote the 23rd Psalm. A little four-and-a-half year old girl raised her hand. The teacher was skeptical, but with a smile on her face she invited the little girl to go ahead. The little girl stood up and facing the other kids she said, "The Lord is my shepherd that's all I want." Then she sat down. ⁱⁱ

"That's all I want." Art Linkletter was right, wasn't he? This little girl might not have known exactly what she was saying, but her words get to the heart of King David's story – and the message of the 23rd Psalm. No matter how desperate the situation may be, if "God is all I want" then we've got enough to make it through.

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." There is power in that first verse of today's Psalm. It is the power that comes from refusing to rely on anything less than our God. It is the power that comes from learning to trust only in God. But how is it that we come to experience that power for ourselves? How do we come to know God as a shepherd who leaves us wanting for nothing? It certainly doesn't happen automatically. And it doesn't happen easily either. But the truth is: if we allow it to happen, God can be as powerful and as instrumental in our lives as was the case in the life of King David.

David declares that with God as Shepherd, there is no want. But listen to where the Psalm goes from there. He makes me lie down. He leads me. He restores me. He leads me. David came to know God as a shepherd who left him wanting for nothing when David allowed God to lead him through life.

That seems to be a particularly hard thing to do these days. We live in a world where we are accustomed to being in control. We want to be in charge of our own destiny. We want to rely on our own strength; our own resources; our own ingenuity. We want to be in charge of our own security. We might take advice from God now and then, but when God's word comes to us as a challenge to our own presumptions, we find ourselves rebelling, and going in different directions.

It reminds me of the bumper sticker we used to see on cars many years ago that read: *God Is My Co-Pilot*. I used to wonder what God thought of the prospect of being the co-pilot – serving at the whim of the pilot. God doesn't want to be our co-pilot. God wants to be our shepherd: making us lie down; leading us beside still waters; restoring us; leading us in right paths. It is only when life is shaped by God's leading that we come to know what it means to need nothing else.

What does it mean to invite God to lead us? It means to turn to the guidance of God's word when making decisions that are critical in our lives. For our young people, it means to turn to the guidance of God's word when we make decisions about sexuality, or drugs, or alcohol. For older believers, it means to turn to the guidance of God's word when we find ourselves more interested in living beyond our means than in faithfully tithing to Christian ministry. For all of us, it means to turn to the guidance of God's word when we find ourselves tempted to abandon the responsibility God has given us for the most vulnerable members of our society. We begin to experience God's leading when we turn to the guidance of God's word for all the critical decisions in our lives.

We're taking a look at what it means to be a student of God's word in the Adult Bible class each Sunday morning between services. We've talked about the complicated story of the development of the Bible as we know it. We've talked about the variety of ways to interpret the words of Scripture. We've talked about the many different conclusions that faithful readers of the Bible have reached on various moral and theological issues. But we've also talked about our belief that God's word comes to us through faithful study of the Bible, and through thoughtful reflection on God's role in our lives. It is a word that comes to us with strength and authority. It is a word that we ignore at our own peril. It is a word that, when we follow its leading, grounds our living in the presence of God that is more than we could ever want or need.

God is present in the word – leading us and guiding us – and entering into our lives as a shepherd who leaves us wanting for nothing. As we submit to God's leading in our lives, as we grow in our ability to live as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we begin to experience the comfort and the strength and the hope that King David knew. When God functions in our lives as Shepherd, we know what it means to want of nothing, even in the most challenging of times. May each of us turn our hearts and our lives over to God, that the future may hold for us not fear and anxiety, but hope and joy. That is the life King David knew. That is the life commended to us in the 23rd Psalm. That is the life we wish for each other to know.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (October 9, 2005)

Text: ⁱⁱⁱ

¹ A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff -- they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. ^{iv}

ⁱ Illustration from "The Six Longest Short Verses in the Bible" – found on www.homileticsonline.com – un-attributed.

ⁱⁱ Illustration attributed to Robert Ketchum in a sermon entitled "God Walks beside You" by David Stone, Associate Preaching Pastor at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky – found on www.preachingplus.com. Another illustration from that same sermon points to the need that all sheep (and each of us) have to be led: *Sheep are easily led, and because of that they are easily led astray. They're needy, defenseless, and nervous. I heard about a man who hated his wife's cat. He wanted to get rid of it, but she wouldn't let him. Finally one day he decided he had had enough! So, he put the cat in his car and drove to the other side of town, let the cat out, and drove home. As he pulled into his driveway, there was the cat walking up the driveway. He said, "I can't believe this!" The next day, he put the cat back in the car and drove ten miles away. He let the cat out, then sped back as fast as he possibly could. As he got to his house, there was the cat yawning and walking in the house. He was so infuriated! The next day he put the cat in the car and went way out in the country. He drove about twenty miles, took a left at a bridge, went on a little back alley, went down some country roads, and was in the deepest part of the woods and he dropped the cat off. A few hours later, the man called his wife at home and asked her, "Honey is the cat there?" "Yes, why do you ask?" answered the wife. The frustrated man said, "Well put her on the phone, I'm lost and I need directions."*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Cats can do that, we hear dogs can do that, but sheep can't!*

A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

^{iv} Psalm 23, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).