

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
April 21, 2024

One of the many areas of parish life here at St. Mark's that I find a great deal of joy in is leading our morning prayer group once a week. Each Thursday morning at 9 AM, I have the privilege of hopping on Zoom (which, brief side note, is a sentence no one has ever said, ever, until right now), and seeing a handful of the friendliest and most delightful people you could pray with. After greeting each other and briefly checking in, we pray through the office together, and it's so beautiful and encouraging to see the commitment people have to prayer and to one another.

Now a few weeks ago, I had to make a last minute trip to Omaha, Nebraska, and I had to leave on a Thursday morning. I had to go to Omaha because just the day before, my grandfather had entered hospice care. He was close to death's door, and my mother had let us kids know the end was near. Hoping to be able to say goodbye before he passed, as well as offer comfort to my grandmother, I got in the car and drove.

Now, fortunately for me, the wonderful Rev. Jana Troutman Miller was willing to sub for me for Morning Prayer so it didn't have to be canceled outright. So there I was on my drive, and around at around 9:10 or so on Thursday morning, after prayer had already begun, and as I was somewhere in the vicinity of Beloit if I recall correctly, I made the decision to hop on Morning Prayer with my phone. Now, it was maybe not the safest or smartest thing to do. Nevertheless. Since I had joined a bit late, when I was welcomed into the call, they were about to pray the Lord's Prayer together.

And I still remember, as my pilgrimage to my grandparents had just begun, looking out at the fields as I drove, hearing Jana pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."

And as she prayed, the words were like a healing balm I didn't know I needed. It was deeply centering and comforting, and it was the perfect way to begin this journey. I was in death's shadow, and it was the exact provision I needed. It was a provision in the valley of the shadow of death.

I wonder if when we pray passages like Psalm 23, especially when we're most honest, if we would say that it doesn't always feel 100% true to our experience. That is to say, that as we read certain lines, it might land a bit uncomfortably and strange and incongruous with us, like putting on clothes that don't quite fit right.

And I think part of the reason for this is because maybe we think we're supposed to read things like Psalm 23 with rose-colored glasses, to sort of take them in as a cheerful and happy kind of descriptor of a life well lived. After all, we have green pastures, and still waters. It can evoke cute little cross stitch artwork, or Precious Moments figurines. It can feel very safe and serene

and picturesque, as if we're all galloping in a field of tulips without a care in the world; and that *this* is what it means for the Lord to be our shepherd. That the Lord is our shepherd if and when everything is light and breezy and problem-free.

And so I wonder what feelings and emotions come up when we pray things like,

"I shall not be in want"

Or

"I shall fear no evil".

I shall not want? Really? Must be nice! That's easier said than done, isn't it? What about when we have very real and honest needs, be they financial, emotional or physical health related, work related, relationship based? Is the Lord not our shepherd then? Or what about the poor and oppressed in our community? Is the Lord not their shepherd then? Or what if we just have basic wants and desires in life as humans?

And "I shall fear no evil"? As author Cole Arthur Riley mentions, this phrase can feel like an "indictment" on those who do fear, as if they aren't being faithful to God.¹ What about those around the world in war-torn areas like Gaza and Israel, or Sudan (and the list could go on)? Or the very real fears we may face on a daily basis that keep us up at night? The never ending list of things that cause anxiety and stress? Is the Lord no longer our shepherd the minute we become afraid?

And Riley writes, "I wouldn't dare criticize Christ in the garden - sweating, crying, pleading for God to let the cup pass from him. This is a Christ who knew fear deeply. And if God himself has been afraid, I have to believe he is tender with our own fear."²

So if we do feel a bit of tension when reading this Psalm, if we feel as though it's not true to our lived experience, how do we make sense of it then?

I would suggest that the Lord is our shepherd not due to the absence of fear, or want, or darkness, or conflict, but precisely because of its presence. It's when we find ourselves in the midst of those things that God proves his character as shepherd to us most. We receive the provision in the valley of the shadow of death.

We find comfort when we step out in faith, even if we're still afraid.

We find green pastures as a reprieve from tough terrain.

We are revived when life has us running out of breath, tired, and ready to give up.

¹ Riley, Cole Arthur. "Seven: Fear." *This Here Flesh*, Convergent, New York, New York, 2023, pp. 83.

² Ibid, pp 84.

Or, as my wife pointed out the other day when we were discussing today's Scriptures, we're given strength and boldness like the apostles in our first reading: Instead of cowering behind locked doors, they're now able to stand face to face with the same leaders who executed their friend in the most humiliating fashion. This is "you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" lived out. The Lord is their shepherd not because of the absence of conflict, but in the midst of it.

The abiding truth that the Lord is our shepherd is true not because life is perfect and care-free, but precisely because it's not.

The truth is my life hasn't been free from want or need; it hasn't been free from fear or shadows, or even enemies I suppose. And, as I was reminded by an article by New Testament scholar Esau McCaully, the more I think about it, the more I think it's foolish to try and live a life that is absent of those things.³ My life hasn't been free from those things, and it never will be. But what I have had is a Good Shepherd.

Amen.

³ McCaulley, Esau. "Giving Joy to Our Children Is the One Thing We Can Control." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 16 Apr. 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/04/16/opinion/parenting-mistakes-joy.html.