

## **Season after Pentecost/Psalms 13**

June 18, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: John 10: 1-4; Psalm 23

“Psalm 23 - It’s Not Just for Funerals”

*Grace to you and peace from our Triune God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

Wesley Woods is a Senior Living Community in Atlanta, Georgia. It is associated with Emory Hospital. There are independent living apartments in Wesley Towers, assisted living at Budd Terrace, and a geriatric-exclusive hospital. I know this because I was assigned to the Wesley Woods campus for the Clinical Pastoral Care unit required by my seminary. Once a week at the Budd Terrace, a catholic priest could come to offer mass and holy communion. The catholic seminarians were charged with gathering the Catholic residents from the various floors for mass. Since I was assigned to the Alzheimer’s floor, they asked if I would bring down those Catholic residents for Mass.

This is how it worked. I had a list of the residents who were Catholic. When I found them, I would ask if they wanted to go to mass today. Anyone who would say yes would become part of my moving flock of worshipers. This might take a long time. I had to continuously explain where we would be going and why, while keeping them together. The catholic residents would often turn to a neighbor and ask them to go to church, too, which required the nursing staff approval and another name on my list. Finally, I would punch in the codes so we would get on the elevator to go down to the worship area. Once we got on the elevator, one woman would pepper me with this question, “Do you know how to get us back?” The first time this happened, I answered with a blend of amusement and assurance until I looked into her face, “Do you know how to get me back to my room?” Behind the woman’s pleasant smile was tension as her eyes darted around and she wrung her hands. This was no joke, this was fear — a fear of getting lost or being lost, a fear of losing the place that seemed safe. I would often take her hand or touch her shoulder as I said her name and repeated I would get everyone back safe and sound. I knew the way.

When I look back on that summer, I think it was amazing the woman came with me at all. She was not wrong in her fear. In the fog of her illness, she could very easily get lost and not be able to tell anyone who she was or where she lived. I was a virtual stranger with a chaplain badge in whom she bravely put her trust so she could go to mass and receive Holy Communion. She was living the twenty-third psalm. It wasn't just about what would happen when she died. It was about how she could live, even at her most vulnerable.

The twenty-third psalm is one of the most well-known passages of the Bible. Some of you here remember memorizing it in Sunday school. It was at Wesley Woods that I learned if I began the King James' version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, many of my elders on and off the Alzheimer's floor, would recite it with me from memory. That seems so appropriate since this psalm of trust is not written from youthful naivety but from one who has walked "through dark valleys before, experienced God's steadfast love in the midst of suffering before, and they so trust ---- even though the dangers are very real."<sup>1</sup> Psalms of trust are "prayed from a situation of severe crisis."<sup>2</sup> But instead of fear and desperation, the tone is one of well-tried and proven trust in God.

In the center of Psalm 23 you read, "You are with me." In Hebrew, there are exactly 26 words before and 26 words after "You are with me."<sup>3</sup> It is literally and figuratively the central point. "You are with me,' – That is why I can walk through the darkest valley without fear. 'You are with me,' – That is why I can trust that God's goodness and mercy will follow me (literally, 'pursue me') all the days of my life. 'You are with me,' – that, finally, is why I can trust that I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."<sup>4</sup> The wisdom of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is that God is with us is at the very center of our

faith and our lives. It is the truth proclaimed in Holy Scripture, Jesus and the faithful church. “God is with us,” means not just after death but in each and every “now” on this side of eternity, too. We live differently when we let “You are with me” become the very breath we breathe.

There is another telling thing that happens at that pivotal “You are with me.” Look at the psalm for a moment. In those first beautiful verses of the psalm, God is referred to in the third person. The psalmist is talking *about* God. “He” makes me lie down . . . “he” leads me . . . “he” restores.” When we hit that center, the pronouns shift to the second person. “You” are with me . . . your rod and staff . . . you prepare . . . you anoint. Instead of talking about God, the psalmist is talking directly to God. God isn’t just a pious concept but one with whom there is a relationship. God isn’t just a topic but a person — Father, friend, protector, Savior, comforter. Why the shift? Here is one idea. Notice the movement from green pastures, still waters, restoration and right paths to “the darkest valley.” How very human to cry out directly to God in prayer when the troubles roll in. At those times, God ceases to be in the abstract but becomes real as we cry or raise a fist or plead for God’s intervention or action. Also, notice that the psalmist doesn’t look to God to make the dark valley disappear. Rather, “as a holy act of defiance against the darkness”<sup>5</sup> the psalmist prays: You are with me” as the powerful, loving God you are; “You are with me God,” in the hard times and in the presence of my enemies, your goodness and mercy pursue me all the days of my life.

Shepherd and sheep may not be a part of our everyday experience. Still, the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm is as meaningful and powerful as ever. I would suggest we revive the tradition to memorize this psalm. It is a creed — a profound statement of faith. It is a prayer that

reassures us of God's love and presence in our many blessings and during our trials. It is an anthem of true hope and deep belief even when we struggle to see beyond our current laments, fears and worries. The Psalm 23 also has great wisdom for us in our modern times. The psalmist proclaims, since "God is with us," we can live in the peace of knowing the difference between want-want-want and enough.... Since God is with us, we can live gratefully and generously in God's blessings rather than in the bankruptcy of more more more... Since God is with us we can "reset the hyperactivity of our lives"<sup>6</sup> so we can be restored in the nurturing pasture and living waters of God's provision.

I don't think we should wait for funerals to visit the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. We need its lessons now and daily. I have printed several versions of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm to give you today. Choose one of the versions to pray each day. Learn one version by heart. Let it teach you. Let it lead you not only to green pastures and through dark valleys but also to the Lord and Shepherd who is with us – always and without a doubt.

Linda M Alessandri 6/24/17

## ENDNOTES

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1. Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Preaching Series on Psalms: Week 3, Psalm of Trust" as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)
  2. Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Preaching Series on Psalms: Week 3, Psalm of Trust" as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)
  3. James Linburg, [Psalms](#) (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000)
  4. Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Craft of Preaching* "Psalm 23: God is with Us." Sept. 1, 2015 as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)
  5. Abram K-J, "Psalm 23: Psalm of Trust, Psalm of Defiance" July 20, 2014 as posted on <https://abramkj.com/2014/07/20/psalm-23-psalm-of-trust-psalm-of-defiance/>
  6. Nancy Koester, "Commentary on Psalm 23" as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)