

First Trinity Lutheran Church
April 29, 2007
John 10:22-30

The Good Shepherd

The Twenty-Third Psalm is one of the most well-known chapters in the Bible. Countless people have memorized it. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Many of us recall Sunday-school posters of this favorite psalm superimposed on beautiful painted pictures of Jesus on a grassy hillside, with a lamb over his shoulders, rescuing it from danger. Many children still get great comfort from the image of the kind and gentle Jesus who cares for all God's creatures. This is the Jesus who will stay with a child through a dark night filled with terrors: alligators under the bed and monsters in the closet. This is the Jesus who stays with adults too, through nights of weeping, and loneliness, and worry, and despair. And in those times of danger and grief, many people turn to the Twenty-Third Psalm for comfort. At the bedside of people facing surgery or serious illness, reciting the psalm brings peace and hopefulness. I have read Psalm 23 at many a hospital bedside.

But then, there are the times when events in our lives or in our world throw our peace, our hopefulness, our comfort into doubt – times when the Jesus we remember from our childhood, smiling on that grassy hillside, seems almost irrelevant to the darkness of the world. This kind of pastoral peace was shattered when on Tuesday April 17 when a young man shot thirty-two other people and then himself on the campus of Virginia Tech University. How do we make sense of a world in which a young person can be so troubled, so destructive, and so unable

to receive the help that others offered him? How do we make sense of a world in which such bright, innocent, promising young lives are tragically and suddenly lost? How do we begin to understand a world where people in America, Iraq, Darfur, and a thousand other places die regularly and senselessly? On April 16 the day before the VT shootings 6 American soldiers were killed in Iraq all were under the age of 30. There are a few web sites on the Internet that report on the number of people killed in the war. Including civilians the number stands at 62,000.

How do insert this kind shepherd Jesus, the one who would go anywhere and risk anything to save even the smallest lamb, with our world today? And how does this Jesus have anything at all to do with the worries and dangers of our lives? How can our faith in Jesus help us through a tragedy like the one at Virginia Tech? What can the gentle shepherd do to help?

The wonderful thing about Psalm 23 is just how realistic it is about the darkness of life. Perhaps the picture we get of the Good Shepherd from art and music and childhood memories is an image of pure light and pure sweetness. But the psalm itself knows darkness and fear. Like the writer of the psalm, many Christians have traveled through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. They too have known the threat of the unknown. And yet many have also known the comfort of God's presence, walking alongside them through that dark valley. Many people have felt Jesus' love surrounding and enfolding them in the most difficult moments of their lives. Many have experienced transcendent holiness and light in the darkest of times.

People who spend a lot of time with those who are ill or bereaved begin to know what kind of help brings true comfort. Comfort does not come from assurances that everything will be all right or from clichés that try to explain why everything that happens is God's will. Comfort comes from the simple presence of companions who are willing to sit alongside us in our darkest hours, to walk through the darkness with us, to help us make the darkness holy, and to rejoice with us when small glimmers of light finally begin to shine.

What does our Christian faith tell us. It tells us that our Lord and Savior, the great hero who liberates us, is not the God of light alone. Jesus is sovereign over the darkness too, because he too has been enfolded by darkness. Like us, he has grieved over the senseless waste and tragedy of life. Like us, he has agonized over those who suffer. Jesus entered into the darkness of death. And he promises to walk with us so that we will never have to walk it alone. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

The ultimate truth of our Christian faith, the truth we remember this Easter season and every Sunday as we celebrate the Lord’s Resurrection, is that our Shepherd leads us out of death into life. The Lord who was crucified and who rose again is the same Lord who promises to redeem the world, to relieve it’s suffering, to restore it to wholeness, to inaugurate a new creation. The risen Lord is the sign of the life that God promises to all of us: life transformed, life redeemed, life restored, life abundant, life joyous and eternal and blessed. To help us remember this God prepares a table for all of us, each and every Sunday we can feast at this table. He gives us a foretaste of the feast to come. A table brimful with cups overflowing and overabundant blessings. When we feast at this table we can say with the Psalmist surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the Lord forever.