

In the Presence of Enemies©

John 10:22-30; Psalm 23

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I think it is safe to say the 23rd Psalm is the best-known Psalm of all 150 Psalms. It is right up there with Happy Birthday, with Roses are Red and Violets are blue – all those poems and songs that as soon as we hear the first lines, we automatically fill in the rest.

Psalm 23 is one that is attributed to David. That means David either wrote it or the author had David's story and faith in mind as he (or she) was writing it.

David was a shepherd boy himself, and the least likely of his brothers to be chosen by God to become King of Judah. Wouldn't it be great to see David's face today, if he could realize all these years later how this little statement of faith in a protecting, compassionate, providing God, has been so well known and such a comfort in times of trouble?

This is the Psalm that is so often requested for funeral services. It is one I include when reading Scripture to a person who is dying. So often, even when that person has been unable to talk to me, as soon as I begin reading, I see their lips moving as they repeat the familiar words along with me.

I love the last words of the Psalm: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I once saw a figurine at the Precious Moments store that had a shepherd with 3 sheep right behind him. The sheep names were: Shirley and Goodness and Mercy. And the little sign said: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Now that's good news!

Where do you go for good news? ABC? CBS? NBC? FOX? CSN?

You might go to one or more of those stations for news, but I'll bet you don't go to any one of them expecting to find much in the way of good news!

Some people tell me they just don't even listen to the news. I suppose the saying might be true – "no news is good news."

But, no news at all seems like maybe living in an unreal world with a false sense of security.

Yet, if we watch too much for too long, the visual reality of what is wrong with the world begins to overwhelm us and we come to think there is no good news. We can even be persuaded that there is more evil in the world than good.

Just this past week, we remembered with all those in Oklahoma City, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building that took place on April 19, 1995.

And on the day of September 11th, 2001, millions of people all over the world had their eyes glued to the television. That was definitely not a good news day. And it certainly put us on edge! It made us suspicious of anyone who looked different. For some of us, it was the first time we realized just how vulnerable we are. It seemed we were surrounded by enemies.

And today, we might think those enemies have multiplied, as we listen and watch the news. But, while there is evidence that we do have enemies and that evil is in our midst, I think there is much good to rejoice and give thanks for.

Our Scripture lessons today – both the gospel reading from John, and the 23rd Psalm – come with good news for anyone who has fear of enemies.

The Shepherd image was one that was easy for Biblical people to understand – more so than for us today. Most of us haven't had much experience with leading flocks of sheep.

Growing up, I had plenty of experience helping with herding cattle – surrounding them and prodding them to go in the direction we wanted. I never saw a cow that would just follow anyone, unless it was the truck full of alfalfa on a winter's day.

But sheep are different. They hear the voice of the shepherd that watches over their flock. They know that shepherd, they trust him, and they follow him wherever he leads.

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, who is a Bible Scholar who lived in the Middle East for many years, tells about the shepherd and how at night all the sheep were often herded into one area that was surrounded by a wall. The sheep would come in and go out through the sheep gate, as would the shepherd.

In the morning, when it was time to separate the sheep so they could take out for grazing, the sheep looked much the same, yet the shepherd knew all the little details about each one. That one has a twitch in it's eye; this one has a small mark on it's hoof; another one is more fearful than the others.

But the sheep also know which voice is the familiar sound of their shepherd. Perhaps it is the way he raises his voice, or the particular call, or the whistle that is just theirs to hear and know.

It brings us back to the good news we hear in John. The Jewish leaders were frustrated with Jesus and wanted him to just come out with it --- “are you the Messiah, the one we've been waiting for? Or are you not?”

Jesus answers – “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

The psalmist writes – “You prepare a table in the presence of my enemies.”

In this psalm we imagine a beautiful, peaceful, pastoral spot with quiet waters, lush green pastures, and sheep grazing and lying down resting. There may be wolves and other wild animals who are on the outskirts watching, waiting for an opportunity to pounce, but the shepherd watches and protects his flock.

In fact the shepherd will go to any lengths to keep his sheep safe, even risking his own life. The shepherd is dead serious about his job and the sheep trust him to take them through the dark, scary paths.

We are reminded of the parable that Jesus told in Luke of the story of the Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to go out in search for the 1 lost sheep until he finally finds it. Even one sheep is precious and valuable to the shepherd. He will not let even one be lost.

As Christians, it is easy to see Christ in this image of the shepherd. Jesus calls himself the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. We who trust in Jesus as Savior, are sheep of his own fold. We hear his voice and we trust him to lead us to safe places – to provide all we need – to protect us from the enemies that surround us.

Who are our enemies today? It’s difficult to relate to the enemies a shepherd or sheep might face but we don’t have to think too hard to think of people and things that seem to be our enemies. At least the fear of those who are not like us, those who don’t think or act like us – they just might be an enemy.

Our enemies might be the person who had to lay us off from work, or could be our neighbor who just doesn’t like us because we choose to not rake our leaves or we let our dog bark too much.

But, in my mind those are enemies that could be just a breath away from becoming a friend. Taking the first step to talk and to understand, to work out differences can lead to peaceful solutions and to solid, caring friends.

While it is true that there are those around us who would do us harm for whatever reason, that evil has always been in this world and has loved to distract and seduce us, we have a shepherd who is a strong, mighty Savior. He is powerful to save us, even from the hand of the devil himself.

Jesus says no one can snatch those who belong to me away from me. No one! As the Apostle Paul says “Nothing can separate me from the love of God. Nothing. Not even death!

That means Satan and all his army.

That means my own self-made enemies of greed, lust, being judgmental, being a glutton, self-pity or just allowing myself to turn when other voices call me; being distracted by the call of climbing higher, of making more money, of flirting with danger, of hearing other gods and allowing myself to follow them, instead of keeping my ears open for my shepherd, Jesus, and obediently following wherever he leads – knowing that he will lead me to eternal life, and I will dwell in his house forever and forever.

In Jesus Christ, we have a good shepherd – we have everything and even more that we need in him. He gave his life for us so we might be saved – given new life.

He gives us living waters to drink until we are thirsty no more. He feeds us on the bread of life. At the Lord’s Supper, which he provided for us, we are fed with food to live on, soul food, food that strengthens our very core.

Jesus the great healer, the protector, the provider, the comforter, the leader, is the one we want and need as shepherd of our entire life – body and spirit.

Jesus said, my sheep hear my voice, and they follow.

Most of us know the words of Psalm 23 very well. Many of us could recite it from memory.

But the question we might ask ourselves is:

I know the Psalm, but how well do I know the voice of the shepherd – Jesus. And how much am I willing to follow him when he calls?

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