

The Sunday Missive – July 21, 2024

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 436 Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates

Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates; behold, the King of glory waits!
The King of kings is drawing near; the Savior of the world is here.

Fling wide the portals of your heart; make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
Adorned with prayer and love and joy.

Redeemer, come! I open wide my heart to thee: here, Lord, abide!
Let me thy inner presence feel: thy grace and love in me reveal.

So come, my Sovereign; enter in! Let new and nobler life begin;
Thy Holy Spirit guide us on, until the glorious crown be won.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTYDOfyW734>

or

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPDoQE4b70A>

The Collect of the Day

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities
before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our
weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our
unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask;
through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives
and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd* ***I shall not be in want.***

Who makes me to lie down in green pastures* ***And leads me beside still waters.***

Who revives my soul* ***And guides me along right pathways for righteousness' sake.***

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil* ***For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.***

You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me* ***You have anointed my head with oil and my cup is running over.***

Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life* ***And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.***

Ephesians 2:11-22

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” —a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Hymn 686 Come, thou fount of every blessing

Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace!
Streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! Oh, fix me on it, mount of God's unchanging love.

Here I find my greatest treasure; hither by thy help, I've come;
And I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.

Oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8n28YjJNU>

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Surely, Goodness and Mercy -- Proper 11B

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord...The days are surely coming, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, who shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Our passage from Jeremiah has two parts. First, we hear the condemnation of those “shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep” along with the promise of salvation to their neglected and abused flock. God will take away the source of their fear by installing shepherds who will really shepherd them. The second part gets specific: The Lord will raise up a just and righteous king in the line of David, one who will save them. The second part can be seen as the tangible realization of the first.

Jeremiah is talking about David’s line but it’s sixteen kings later. By comparison, they have King Charles III these days over there in Merry Olde England. Sixteen monarchs ago we’re talking the beginning of the 1600’s, with four different families being represented in the interim. So, the idea of direct descent from David is almost certainly symbolic.

The metaphor of good and bad shepherds employs familiar and fundamental imagery from a pastoral culture. God as the skilled and compassionate shepherd who leads us like a good shepherd who cares for his sheep was a widespread view of both gods and kings in the Ancient Near East. The imagery is only strengthened by the tradition that David was himself a shepherd. When applied to David, the image is a rich combination of power and gentle care: the shepherd as monarch, the ruler as pastor. And even though this idea of a king is an idealized one, the underlying desire and promise are both palpable and historical. This same promise is what the earliest followers of Jesus saw fulfilled in him: God’s will in the flesh.

And what is God's will? A good place to start is with the world's favorite psalm, with what those of us who were not, perhaps paying the closest attention in Sunday school remember as Surely, Goodness and Mercy, the three sisters of virtue. They are not to be confused with Anton Chekhov's three sisters, Olga, Masha and Irina nor with the three Greek Moirai, aka: the Fates, and certainly not the three weird witches from Will Shakespeare.

Scholars tell us that three quite different Hebrew words appear in English translation as *mercy*. *Chanan* evolved from a verb *chanah*, which often meant to pitch a tent, and was used to indicate graciousness: Compassion begins in one's own tent. *Racham* comes from a verb that meant to caress, indicating tenderness and understanding: My goodness indeed becomes your goodness. And then there's *Chesed*, the word found here in the 23rd psalm, that could also mean love or kindness, or both at the same time: lovingkindness, that is mercy.

The phrase, 'Surely, goodness and mercy' expresses our feelings about God, but it also indicates the aspects of human relationships we must attend to if we are to be godly people. Sometimes, we preach the Gospel by talking, but mostly, it is by doing.

One wag tells the story tells of the devout Lutheran fellow who has died after what he thought was a grace-filled life. He finds himself in the afterlife baffled and dismayed by the searing heat and licking flames all around him in his new home. He staggers, gasping, over to another of his co-religionists and, through the clouds of sulphur, chokes, "This is not exactly the way we pictured heaven, is it?" "No,

it isn't; it isn't at all," the man painfully replies, "I see our brother Martin Luther over there, let's ask him about this supposed paradise." So, they make their way through the smoke to the great evangelist, still in his brown robe and perspiring profusely, and they ask him what went wrong. Luther finishes coughing, looks at them with resignation and sighs, "It was works after all."

With a few lines that convey deeply expressive metaphors, Psalm 23 portrays the relationship between the deity and the believer. What God does for us serves as a model for what we are to do for one another. To imbue in each other the feeling of serenity that arrives when trouble has been left behind.

A common saying among shepherds in the Middle East when talking about getting a field ready for grazing is to "set the table." Perhaps they need to tear out toxic vegetation the sheep cannot digest or tolerate, or briars that would ruin their wool, like the dastardly burdocks we spent many a backbreaking hour rooting out on our farm in Western New York. Maybe there are snakes or scorpions that have to be chased away. Preparing a table is one activity of actual sheep-herders. Of course, the psalm also is meant for us and our human lives too. In portraying God as our host, we remind ourselves of the blessings we receive, not only protection and food, but also comfort – precious oil to anoint us, cups filled to overflowing, a safe place to lie down.

At last we are reassured that compassion and understanding, however scarce or generous their supply in human society, will always be present and plentiful in God.

To live in the house of the Lord forever is not just a promise of the hereafter, but also of the here and now.

So the twelve were back from their first mission to “Feed my Sheep,” as Jesus had commissioned them. Upon their return, they have become, not merely disciples but Apostles. They are no longer merely followers of Jesus, now they are ministers of Christ. And he bids them rest with him. But the people keep pressing in on them. “As Jesus looked at the people, he realized that their need was greater than his own. They were hungry for the truth he could impart, and as confused as sheep that have no shepherd. In his compassion, the Lord began to teach them.”

To the crowds of people who sought him, Jesus was the kind and careful pastor. In describing the lives of prophets and priests and God’s very self, the image of a shepherd was a familiar one. Mark takes care to point out that this kind of shepherd teaches first, and only after that provides earthly food. First the bread of life, then, close behind, the bread of tummy.

In Christian stories and liturgies, when we hear about bread, it’s the Greek word, *artos* that was used, ordinary bread made with yeast. Hoping the word would be related to our word, ‘art,’ as in ‘art is bread,’ along with vice-versa, I raced to the reference library but, alas, art in Ancient Greek was *techno*. This set off all kinds of conspiracy alarms and opened several rabbit holes. But I’m back now, and Jesus is still drawing us to the sublime depot at the junction of food, faith and philosophy where we are fulfilled.

The feeding of the five thousand comes right after today's story. Apart from the Lord's resurrection, this is the only miracle reported in all four Gospels. And bread is at the center of the message. One might note that the practice we see in most churches of using little wafers of an unidentifiable paper-like substance has obscured the once-powerful symbolism of a congregation sharing one loaf of baked bread the way we do here. The practice, as James Adams points out, separates the ritual meal from familiar forms of bread. The wafer is a symbol of a symbol and can't evoke what the early followers of Jesus in the look, texture, smell and taste of the loaf they broke and shared in Jesus' name.

Adams goes on: "As a metaphor, bread continues to represent all the necessities of life. People say they want to put bread on the table; we pray to God for our daily bread. Bread has often been a metaphor for money. The metaphor has also worked for many people as they try to explain how their experience of Jesus has been lifegiving. Contact with the Jesus tradition can sometimes allow a person to imagine being a companion of Jesus, being taught and being fed. The Good Shepherd leads us to where we will be filled and fulfilled. Jesus, like bread, can be a primary source of nourishment." And thus we study the word together, we sing and we pray, and always we break our daily bread in the company of God and one another – this is our green pasture our still water, the place where our souls can be restored.

Hymn 372 Praise to the living God

Praise to the living God! All praised be his Name
Who was, and is, and is to be, for ay the same.
The one eternal God ere aught that now appears:
The first, the last, beyond all thought his timeless years!

Formless, all lovely forms declare his loveliness;
Holy, no holiness of earth can his express.
Lo, he is Lord of all. Creation speaks his praise,
And everywhere above, below, his will obeys.

His Spirit floweth free, high surging where it will:
In prophet's word he spake of old: he speaketh still.
Established is his law, and changeless it shall stand,
Deep writ upon the human heart, on sea, on land.

Eternal life hath he implanted in the soul;
His love shall be our strength and stay while ages roll.
Praise to the living God! All praised be his Name
Who was, and is, and is to be, for ay the same.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SRZL1Yfk8s>

The Shepherd

How sweet is the shepherd's sweet lot!
From the morn to the evening he strays;
He shall follow his sheep all the day,
And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

For he hears the lambs' innocent call,
And he hears the ewes' tender reply;
He is watchful while they are in peace,
For they know when their shepherd is nigh.

William Blake