

“Gathered Into The Fold”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
May 11th, 2014
4th Sun. in Easter
Mothers' Day

Psalm 23

John 10:1-10

‘...for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me...’

Psalm 23:4b-5a

Let us pray... O God,

In this world there is trouble, but you send your people to bear witness
that you are always present and your love prevails.

Amen

‘For thou art with me...’

Those words turn Psalm 23 into a prayer.

It begins with ‘The Lord is my shepherd...’

The 23rd Psalm starts out as a poem... or a song... a hymn *about* God...

but then, it becomes a prayer, speaking directly to God...

Together with ‘The Lord’s Prayer’, the 23rd Psalm, my mom taught me at bedside
to pray each night – along with what I call the “Laundry List Prayer”...

“God bless Mom & Dad” and so on...

You know, the “laundry list” of people you love and who love you.

‘God bless...’

You would think there would be a “please” in there, somewhere.

I mean after all, we are talking to the Lord, the Creator of the Universe, our Savior...

It’s the same thing with ‘God, help me...’

That’s an imperative – a demand: ‘Help me.’

I believe this to be the oldest prayer: ‘Help me...’

At Come & Consider class, I begin by talking about the origins of our faith
and relationship with God.

It doesn’t matter how fast you can run or how good your aim is as a hunter,
if there are no herds of animals and no food to bring home, what do you do?

It doesn’t matter how green your thumb is as a farmer,
if there is no rain and the crops fail, where do you turn?

People turned to the spirit-world; they put their hope in what was unseen
and cried out in their desperation, “Help me!”

In our Christian tradition, that ancient prayer evolved into
the ‘Kyrie’ – ‘Kyrie eleison’, ‘Lord, have mercy’.

Another name for it is ‘The Jesus Prayer’ which is a building block
of Eastern Orthodox Christian worship liturgy –

‘Kyrie eleison, Kyrie eleison, Kyrie eleison...’

Willard, p.2

The Way of A Pilgrim is a book by an anonymous author who tells about a Russian peasant's travels throughout his homeland on his search for spiritual enlightenment – specifically to learn what the Apostle Paul meant in 1st Thessalonians 5:17... 'Pray without ceasing.'

He was told by a holy man to pray the Jesus prayer so many thousand times a day and come back when he achieved this – which he did.

Then, he was told to pray so many more thousands of times a day – and he did, until it became automatic – a prayer of the heart, 'God, help me...'

Like a mother listens for her baby in the night, God listens for us and it doesn't take a thousand times to get God's attention – though it might take a few thousand times to get our attention.

It doesn't even take two times, before God is there for us, like the mother who comes to her baby, crying in the night.

The answer that God sends right back to that request of 'Help me', is 'Fear not'.

God says this directly, though it is also spoken by angels and prophets.

Jesus himself tells his disciples in Luke 12:32...

"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Using computer software,

I counted 46 times that, 'fear not' – or a similar expression, was used in the Bible as a word of encouragement from God.

It is in the form of an imperative to us, a commandment –

We could even think of it as the 11th Commandment:

'Fear not!'

As it is written in Isaiah 41:10, God said...

'...fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.'

There are plenty of things in our world to be afraid of –

like those individuals or groups of people who act without conscience or concern for anyone.

Yet we are told in the Bible that the only thing we should be afraid of is God –

as if God was an angry parent – like that jokey highway billboard,

that supposedly quotes God saying, 'Don't make come down there.'

In my house growing up, corporal punishment came under the jurisdiction of my mother and justice was exacted upon us in the form of...

the dreaded flyswatter.

I can laugh about it now, but it wasn't funny then!

Willard, p.3

I believe we are to understand 'the fear of God' in terms of that which inspires awe –
like the ocean in a storm, or the sinewy strength of a tiger,
the vast array of stars at night or the delicacy of a butterfly's wing.
But for those who would do crimes against humanity –
like the kidnapping of those little girls in Nigeria, there will be justice
and the fear of God will carry a different meaning...

I must be careful when speaking about things that are disturbing in this world,
imagery and words can stop us cold, without listening further.
Some problems of the world seem omnipotent, unchangeable, gigantic obstacles,
but you come here to be reassured that there is a God of justice,
there is a God of healing.
You come here – not to be entertained, but to be equipped.

I have a childhood memory of having gone to a supermarket with my mother.
I remember being alone in a one of the shopping aisles
and my mother was nowhere to be seen.
But I heard the jingling of keys – and I knew who it was without seeing her.
I turned around and there she was.
My mother was carrying her car keys, absentmindedly jingling them
as she was looking at the shelves.
She wasn't even looking for me – because she already knew where I was,
even before I thought I was lost.

Jesus said,
*...the sheep hear [the shepherd's] voice,
and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.
When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them,
and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.*

John 10:3b-4

At such times in life when we are in a crisis,
may we all remember we are not alone –
may those little girls know they are not alone.
May we all remember to call on God for help.
For no matter what we face, God is there for us, and
the answer that God sends right back to our request of 'Help me',
is 'Fear not'.

As it is written in Isaiah 41:10, God said...
*'...fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.'*
Amen

Our first lesson today is from Psalm 23

which is familiar enough to many of us, who may even know it by heart.

This Psalm is traditionally associated with King David

who was a shepherd as a boy...

[1] The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;

[2] he makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters; [3] he restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

[4] Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil; for thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

[5] Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

[6] Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

John 10:1-10

[Jesus said,]

[1] "Truly, truly, I say to you,
[the one] who does not enter the sheepfold by the door
but climbs in by another way, that [one] is a thief and a robber;

[2] but [the one] who enters by the door
is the shepherd of the sheep.

[3] To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice,
and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

[4] When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them,
and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

[5] A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him,
for they do not know the voice of strangers."

[6] This figure Jesus used with them,
but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

[7] So Jesus again said to them,

"Truly, truly, I say to you,
I am the door of the sheep.

[8] All who came before me are thieves and robbers;
but the sheep did not heed them.

[9] I am the door; if any one enters by me,
[they] will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.

[10] The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."