

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt  
Fourth Sunday after Easter - Year C  
St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
Acts 9:36-43  
Psalm 23  
Revelation 7:9-17  
John 10:22-30  
05/08/2022

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

22At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." 25Jesus answered, "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. 29What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. 30The Father and I are one."

The Gospel of Our Lord

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

### **Death and Hope**

Good morning! Several of us meet every Monday at 3pm on Zoom to read assigned texts for the coming Sunday. Anyone can come, and all are invited. This has been a mutually beneficial experience, because it allows me to bounce off ideas and questions for the sermon and those participating are able to delve deeper into the lessons and have input on what I say. Ultimately, we end up with a more engaging and fruitful sermon. But this past Monday I couldn't help but feel like I was missing something. I liked the Gospel reading, and Psalm 23 is a classic, but on some level I wasn't connecting with the assigned texts. The reason why, it seems, was that the Holy Spirit knew what was coming and so our little group wasn't ready yet. Class ended, I did a few things, Megan came home, and just before 5pm Harvey Marshall called... Dianne was dead. As I sat in my car heading up I-64 I realized why I hadn't connected with the texts, the story wasn't finished yet. Even in the midst of pain, God was already working before I even knew it to help me process what was soon about to happen.

Suddenly the texts took on a new meaning. Listen again: *“22At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” 25Jesus answered, “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. 29What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.*

30*The Father and I are one.*” Those are words I needed to hear, and I don’t think I’m the only one.

In today’s Gospel Jesus enters Jerusalem in winter for the Festival of the Dedication, or Hanukkah, as we know it. The weather at that time of the year isn’t that different from our own winters. I wonder if Jesus’ curt response is the result of a tired and weary traveler. Gary D. Jones writes that *“In this passage from John’s Gospel, Jesus says to his demanding inquirers that he has already told them plainly what they need to know. The trouble is that the way Jesus has told them is through his works. In other words, it seems that Jesus’ role and identity cannot be reduced to a title; instead, his role and identity must be experienced. This becomes clear in the analogy of the sheep and shepherd. The sheep know and trust the shepherd, not because they have gone through any sort of rational, intellectual discernment, but because they have experienced the shepherd and his ‘works.’”*<sup>1</sup> Or, to use an expression you may have heard, actions speak louder than words.

Which naturally leads us to ask, what actions has Jesus undertaken? As we look through the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John we see the work of someone who cares deeply about all those around them. Works of compassion and love. A love so fierce and powerful that Jesus wouldn’t let death have the last word. Not for him, and not for us. So we saw Jesus take on the beatings, the torture, and the cross, all because of the love that God had for us. Three days later he came back from the dead, rising to new life. These are things we EXPERIENCE! We can know them intellectually, but they’ll always first and foremost be events that touch our heart. In times

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 2.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 446.

of grief, when we lose someone like Dianne, for whom we cared so deeply, it's these experiences that I fall back on. It's the actions of Jesus my shepherd that give me comfort.

When speaking of Psalm 23 Theodoret of Cyr argued that God's lovingkindness pursued us unrelentingly. He used the analogy of a fugitive running for their life, and how God rushes ahead and with us in the same way.<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine saw Jesus as the shepherd in the Psalm, calling on us to "*Let Christ shine in your heart, who lights the lamp of our minds with the love of God and neighbor; and you will not fear any evils, since he is with you.*"<sup>3</sup>

There is a reason why Psalm 23 is so popular at times of grief and death; it gives us hope. One scholar writes that "*the psalm is both present and personal.*"<sup>4</sup> How true! The words in this text don't just speak of some God who worked long ago to create the world and who then stepped back, or some creator who watches from far away and waits for the end. No, our God reaches out to us now! Catherine L. Kelsey points out that we can be quick to rush ahead when reading the psalm. She calls us to think on the words "*I shall not want.' The God who is named and then addressed... is trustworthy— with our lives, with our choices, with our fears and losses.*"<sup>5</sup>

Our losses... especially our losses. One of the reasons Psalm 23 has endured is because it doesn't sugar coat things. It admits that things are hard. It reminds us that the reality of death is something that hurts. Our

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<sup>2</sup> Just, Arthur A. *Psalms 1-50. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament VII.* Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003. p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 2.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 435.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 432.

grief is real, and our God doesn't shy away from it. Instead, God takes our hand and guides us through.

*"1The Lord | is my shepherd; I shall not | be in want. 2The Lord makes me lie down | in green pastures and leads me be- | side still waters. 3You restore my | soul, O Lord, and guide me along right pathways | for your name's sake. 4Though 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. 5You prepare a table before me in the presence | of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is | running over. 6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days | of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the | Lord forever."<sup>6</sup> Amen.*

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<sup>6</sup> Psalm 23. NRSV