

Psalm 23, Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56: The Lord Is My Shepherd

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31He 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. 32And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34As 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.

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Today, we join many Christian denominations and church networks, including Catholics, Reformed Protestants, Baptists and other Evangelical traditions, who are members of “Churches for Middle East Peace” in observing the Solidarity Sunday for Peace in Middle East. The mission of this collective body of diverse Christian churches is to promote a holistic resolution to conflicts in the Middle East, by advocating equality, human rights, security, and justice for Israelis, Palestinians, and all people of the Middle East.

What a big mission. And they have been, or I should say “We” have been at it for 40 years since 1984. But, we don’t need to be an expert on the history of the Middle East to know the history of conflict in that region is far longer than that. The attack on Israel by Hamas last October and the horrific war that has been going on since has only reminded us of the complexity of the situation even as we pray for all who have suffered and continue to suffer. We’ve been reminded also how the reality of evil and of human suffering can overwhelm us, and make us feel helpless especially when it comes in large scale like war and it is far away and not in our immediate community. What could we possibly do? We ask ourselves.

Rather than to leave us paralyzed, the Spirit moves us to action in compassion, and the Spirit has brought these diverse Christian churches together to work for peace, advocating equality, human rights, security and justice. They say these values are the stuff of the Gospel and it is their mission to promote these values on the world stage. Yes, it’s a big mission. What can we do? Their invitation to us individual congregations today, is to pray in that spirit. So, we

turn to the Scriptures given to us today, Psalm 23 and the Gospel of Mark, in the spirit of prayer for all people of the Middle East and those whose loved ones are there.

This beloved Psalm has brought comfort to many in the moment of overwhelming, almost paralyzing grief, to those who have suffered with devastating losses, giving words to those who are sitting with the pain for which there is no word. Something breaks open in us when, from the depth of sorrow, we open our lips and say the words “the Lord is my shepherd.”

Who is this Lord? The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. The Lord is a shepherd who tends to all that his sheep needs. The green pasture of abundance for food and for rest, and still waters to drink in safety and security. These seemingly basic needs are what restores one’s soul and what the Lord provides as one’s rights, and the Lord is righteous and just.

When speaking of walking through the darkest valley, the psalmist turns to address the Lord directly and intimately as “You.” In the darkest hours of his life, this psalmist says he is not afraid of any evil, “For you are with me,” he says. The very presence of God the shepherd spells safety, security, peace and comfort.

Hebrew songs, including psalms, are highly stylized and very intentionally composed. This phrase, “you are with me,” appears exactly in the mid-point of this psalm, right at the center. The Lord is a shepherd who is always with the sheep. “Being with” is a nature of God. God created us and has never left us. God’s gracious presence is with us all the time and therein lies our hope. God’s presence is what holds us and keeps us whole, lacking nothing. Let us pray that those who are walking through the darkest valley, surrounded by evil, in the Middle East, feel the very presence of God who is with them.

The psalm then shifts from the image of God as a shepherd to God as a host who sets a table for us and gives us drink until our cup overflows does so “in the presence of our enemies.” Even when we are surrounded by our enemies, it is the goodness and loving-kindness of God, not the enemies, that pursues us, the psalmist says. And the house of this God is our dwelling place for life.

This is what we declare when we say “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” It proclaims goodness and grace of God that gives hope that sustains our life in the darkest hours. How can this be? As many as there are those who find comfort in this song in times of great trouble, there are also those who feel these words only make a mockery of their lives destroyed

by the evil. How can we blame them? Well, we don't. Along with everything else in their lives, their faith in God, who is their shepherd and a gracious host, has been destroyed.

Psalm 23 is written in the voice of a psalmist, but as a Scripture, it is a song of a faith community. When one cannot find his or her faith, when the forces of evil have destroyed even the ability to trust in God, the community of faith carries that person. The community of faith will sing the song of hope and trust in the great Shepherd and the host of our lives, and lift up that person in the song.

Even as we pray for the people in the Holy Land that they may feel the presence of God with them in the darkest valley of their lives, let us now pray this psalm of trust, of hope, and of praise together, lifting up, holding, and carrying all those whose faith has been buried under the rubble of destruction of war. I invite you to take the blue Bible in front of you, and turn to page 501.

A Psalm of David.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

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

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Carrying our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land in our song of faith and in our prayers is one act of compassion we can do. God's act of compassion for this broken world was to send Jesus, our great shepherd, to make God's presence known. Jesus is our Emmanuel, "God with Us." And Jesus, in turn, sent the apostles to carry on his work.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus' disciples (which literally means 'learners') are called "apostles" for the first time in the gospel. Apostles mean those who are sent. Jesus knew the work of manifesting the peaceable kingdom of heaven here and now is an ongoing work, often demanding and tiring. So, like a good shepherd who knows the needs of his sheep, Jesus led the apostles who have returned from their ministry to come away with him to a deserted to rest. But the desperate crowd followed Jesus, even going ahead of his way waiting for him. They are hungry and thirsty, their souls await to be restored, and they knew, Jesus would provide all that

they needed. Seeing the crowd, Jesus had compassion for them. And the disciples saw Jesus begin to teach them many things, until their cups overflowed.

What's left out from today's Gospel reading is how Jesus led them to and sat them down in green grass. And how Jesus told his disciples to feed the crowd. And though disbelieving such a huge crowd could be fed to their satisfaction with 5 loaves, the disciples do what Jesus told them and, and when all had eaten, each disciples collected a basket full of crumbs.

Apparently, there is more Jesus' disciples can do, following Jesus' teaching. Promoting equality, human rights of every human created in the image of God, security, justice... peace. Churches for Middle East Peace has collected resources for Christians, the disciples of Christ, do engage in this ongoing ministry of Jesus, believing, together, with God "with us," peace is possible. May it be the channels of that peace. Amen.

Now let us rise in body or in spirit to pray together the Prayer of St. Francis.

Lord, make me a channel of your peace:  
 where there is hatred, **let me sow love;**  
 where there is injury, **your pardon;**  
 where there is doubt, **true faith in you;**  
 where there is despair, **let me bring hope;**  
 where there is darkness, **only light;**  
 where there is sadness, **ever joy.**

O Master, grant that I may never seek so much  
 to be consoled **as to console,**  
 to be understood **as to understand,**  
 to be loved **as to love.**

**For it is in giving that we receive,  
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.**

**Amen**