

Pastor Roy's Sermon from July 22, 2018

The Hebrews, the Israelites, and the Jews—these were the people of God in Palestine over the course of a 1500 years. The jobs of local and regional king, prophet, and priest had very similar qualifications. All were expected to lead with justice and compassion. Worship was not just what happened at the temple or at holy sites, the foundation and integrity of worship was how one lived with one's neighbors. The law was written later to give examples of how to be a good neighbor. From time to time there were disagreements about how and who to worship. But these arguments ultimately went back to the meatier issue of living well with neighbor. The Baals, the Ashtoreth, and other lesser gods were not primarily concerned with how well neighbors lived together. They were sought by sacrifice when a farmer wanted a good crop, or good health, or maybe a king wanted to win a battle.

Over the generations, the prophets and priests invited the people to seek Yahweh, El, who was the supreme over the lesser gods. Yahweh is not unreachable and distant, but concerned with faithful living, kindness offered to neighbor even as it is received day by day from the God's hand. If a king was a faithful judge and sought to be faithful to the ways of Yahweh, he was a good king. Even David's son Solomon is not judged a good king because he allows the ways of greed, fear, and enslavement to guide his decisions and leadership in the land. It's no wonder the kingdom is divided as soon as he dies. His actions betray that for him political gain is more important than justice and freedom.

When Jeremiah mentions shepherds, he is talking about all leaders: kings, prophets, priests, but especially kings. The shepherds of Israel have scattered the sheep and not attended to them. They have failed—thus Judah has gone into exile.

But Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, has good news. "I will bring them back and 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 Lord will raise up many good shepherds.

And then he looks further into the future. He will raise up a new great king, like David. He will deal wisely, execute justice and righteousness in the land. The old ways of enslavement, greed, and fear driven politics will be set aside and all will have the opportunity to overcome and be well. The good ole boy club of a privileged few will be overturned for the ways of true justice and mercy. Jeremiah proclaims even as Judah goes into exile that a people will return with joy and gladness because a new day is coming. Many good shepherds will make room for a Good Shepherd King whose Lord is "my shepherd."

The 23rd Psalm reminds us of the nature of God and also the qualities of a good king or pastor. God, and good leaders provide opportunity for the sharing of abundance. God, and good leaders provide for rest and peace—for refreshment by listening to and following the Spirit of God. The 23rd Psalm exalts God as the one who takes away our fear of evil and death because this God never lets go, never withdraws comfort and final protection.

Each of us has known pain and loss. Clearly, some more than others, but if our eyes and ears are open, we know that there is profound suffering in our world. Yet God draws near in holy stillness to those in pain. God brings comfort. It's pretty clear that God does not shield us from pain and loss, but God, as Christ did on the cross, shares our pain and loss. We are not alone. No one is alone. A good leader is open to the God who is incarnated in pain and in healing. The Spirit of Christ is revealed on the cross. Suffering love. The good shepherd does not allow fear of pain and loss to distract or become an obsession. Fear is fear, there is nothing wrong with fear. In fact, fear can point us to the embrace of God. Over and over again. Fear is diminished when it is not feared. Imagine not being afraid of fear? Just allowing it to wash over us when it visits.

The 23rd Psalm reminds us that God spreads a table before us, despite enemies, maybe, just maybe even at the same table as my enemies. Did you also feel something inside of you say, "Oh, no thank you. I'll fast that meal, I don't want to eat with my enemy. If my enemy becomes a friend, who will I pin my fears and suffering on? Thanks but no thanks, I need my enemy so that I can feel better about myself. Please Jesus, stop asking me to make friends with my enemies." And yet, is not our freedom found in finding new friends?

The 23rd Psalm reminds us that God is healing us (anoint my head with oil, my cup runneth over) with abundance. That goodness and mercy will be with us every day, every night and I will be in the house of God, wherever I labor, or eat, or lay my head.

The Good News of Jesus Christ flows from the 23rd Psalm. If we hear it, we are cut to the quick, we are challenged to live for the good of our neighbor, we are invited to live in the justice of God, not for a privileged few, but for all whom we encounter. Yet we fall short, time and time again. We forget that God will take care of us without fail, without exception.

What are we to do? The Good News is *not* that we are free to live faithfully, the reality is that we will struggle with this till the day we die. The Good News is that God loves us no matter what. The good news is that, in the words of the writer of Ephesians, "Jesus Christ proclaimed peace to those who were far off and to those who were near. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone (not a pretty decoration with a date, but the foundation upon which the rest is built.). The peace of Christ is among us not because we do the right things, but because the gift of God is free, requiring nothing from us at all.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, invites us to live into God's peace, not so that we can be saved, but so that we can experience the freedom of peace and rest and hope. The salvation of God in Christ is poured out with wasteful abandon for all regardless of how they respond. That is the nature of God who gives freely to all. Regardless.

And so Jesus walked along and many were healed. Freely healed. Today, we continue to be healed. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear the healing and the abundance of God. Freely given. Amen.