

## **Dwelling In The House Of The Lord...**

### **The 23rd Psalm**

The Lord *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.

God maketh me to lie down in green pastures;

God leadeth me beside the still water:

God restoreth my soul:

God leadeth me in the paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil:

for thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me

in the presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil;

my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy

shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

## Dwelling In The House Of The Lord...

Psalm 23

May 8, 2022

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### I.

Poor Jarrett. That is all I can say. This was his first week on the job down in the church office and I really put him through the paces; though I wasn't even there. Due to my schedule, I couldn't be in the office on either Tuesday or Thursday, so he was left to figure things out all by himself. Which, I'm pleased to report, he did with great adeptness; and then some. Jarrett is a very quick study, and after only one week on the job I can tell he'll be terrific. By way of example, he learned Lesson #1 of the job: DO NOT run off the bulletins until the last possible moment, *regardless* of what Rev. Mike tells you.

For better or worse, I have the tendency of changing my mind about the sermon which results in alterations to the bulletin. This is for very good reason, though, as life is an ever-flowing stream which changes over time; and though all rivers run to the sea, still it is not full.

### II.

The original title for today's sermon was "Our Bell Ringeth Over," and incorporated the lectionary text from John chapter 10, where Jesus is found walking in the portico of the Temple at the time of the festival of the Dedication. Folks gathered around him and asked, "*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.*" Jesus answered, "*I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*"

Which, in compliment with the 23rd Psalm, pointed me in the homiletical direction of living as a member of God's flock, our cup overflowing with abundance; using the coinciding of our own time of Re-Dedication of the steeple bell in this temple as analogy and illustration. However, the swift moving current that is life swept me right past such an idea and I found myself floating in the still waters further down stream.

### III.

For the second week in a row, it is incumbent upon me to mention the role of my son, Tucker, in helping to inform the sermon. Sitting down to share the evening meal together has always been a priority for our family. As parents, Linda and I feel it is very important that we create a space every evening to break bread together and to talk of the day's events. Or, in "church-speak" to fellowship with one another.

Turns out Tucker had read the article in Tuesday's Watertown Daily Times regarding today's Re-Dedication of the steeple bell, and he got curious about the Martha Manley who donated the bell shortly after her husband, Gilbert, died in 1900. Tucker determined that the Manleys were quite a prominent and well-respected family in Canton, as well as here at our church; with Gilbert being the owner and Editor of the St. Lawrence Plaindealer; purchasing it in 1873 from Seth Remington, father of Frederick.

### IV.

Tucker also determined that Martha and Gilbert Manley are buried in Fairview Cemetery on Miner street. Thursday morning, Linda and I took a drive out there and walked around in the rain until we located the gravesite. Yesterday, Cameron Boswell picked up a bouquet he and I had ordered from White's Flowers on behalf of our church, and prior to this morning's service, I went out and put flowers on Mrs. Manley's grave on the occasion of Mother's Day and in recognition and gratitude for the steeple bell she gave to the church in 1901 which we are re-dedicating today, 121 years later. As you might imagine, all of this served to greatly whet my whistle and I spent Tuesday night and much of Wednesday immersing myself in the fascinating history of this particular House of the Lord here on the Park in Canton, New York.

### V.

Though there are many interesting facts and facets within the history of our church, one in particular is in no way unique to this our congregation: the important and crucial role that women have had in both the *inner workings* and the *outward expressions* of the church. It is this man's opinion that in every church in every age, women are a *critical* component of the body of Christ.

One of the things that struck me, however, both in seeing Mrs. Manley's headstone which reads, "Martha His Wife," and in reviewing the historical record of the members of our church's "Ladies' Aid Society" (founded in 1829) is the place of women in the *church* in contrast to the place of women in *society*. At the centennial of our church's founding, in 1907, I counted 105 members of the Ladies' Aid Society but only 11 women were identified by their first names: Hattie, Jennie, Lucy, Christina, Eva, Cora, Jane, Henrietta, Lillian, Zoe and Angeline; each unmarried. The remaining 94 women were simply recorded as someone's wife, including Mrs. Gilbert Manley.

## **VI.**

In trying imagine our congregation in attendance on the occasion when this bell was originally dedicated, I was reminded that those women who heard it ring for the very first time had seen a great many changes and challenges in their own lifetimes. Up until 1848, married women had no separate economy, including property rights. It wasn't until 1860, that married women had the right to control their own earnings. When this bell first rang out, it would be another 19 years before passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution granted women the right to vote; and, not until 1936 that the federal government would be legally prohibited from interfering with doctors providing contraception to their patients. It was not until the 1970s that married women could obtain a credit card in their own name. Though ever a critical component of the body of Christ, women have always had to struggle with critical components of their own agency, economy, lives and bodies.

## **VII.**

It was with no small degree of irony, then, that I read what I assume to be the motto of the Ladies's Aid Society: "She hath done what she could." This is a quote from Mark chapter 14th, where another unnamed woman comes to Jesus in the days prior to his betrayal, arrest and execution to anoint him with nard. However, some of Jesus' followers were indignant and murmured against her that this costly perfume might have been sold and proceeds been given to the poor. Staying with the King James version, here is how Jesus responded: "*Let her alone; why trouble ye her? She hath wrought a good work on me. For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always. She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying. Verily I say unto you,*

*‘Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.’”*

## **VIII.**

Today, in Re-Dedicating our steeple bell, we have accomplished a great many things. In taking a step back into our history, we have taken two steps forward into our future. In lifting up Martha Manley in thanksgiving and memorial, we also remember all the unnamed women of our church who have been a critical component of the body of Christ here on the Park, as well as the members of the Ladies’ Aid Society who, together, donated the very first steeple bell in 1851 with funds raised from a fair held at the old Town Hall on Court Street. Though we certainly need to care for the poor we always have with us, in restoring the bell we also acknowledge the importance of anointing our community with the joyous sound of its invitation to worship, and to share in the Gospel we proclaim to this small corner of the whole world. Moreover, today we recognize *our* place and part in the ever-flowing stream of time which runs through this particular House of the Lord in which we dwell.

## **IX.**

Today’s scripture reading, the 23rd Psalm, is perhaps the most beloved and widely known in all the Bible. It is also the most concise and complete articulation of a systematic theology one will ever find. In just 6 short verses, the Psalmist proclaims the sovereignty of God (the Lord is our shepherd), the benevolence of God (we shall not want), the nurture and compassion of God (making us to lie down in green pastures), the peace of God (leading us besides still water), the salvation of God (restoring our soul), the justice of God (leading us in paths of righteousness), the protection and presence of God (we shall fear no evil for God is with us), the generosity of God (in preparing a table before us), the claim God places upon us (in anointing us with oil), the bounty of God (our cup overflows), and the hope of God (surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives).

## **X.**

Beautifully written and simply conveyed, any one of these claims could be an entire sermon unto itself. Personally, I’ve always found the idea of being *made* to lie down in green pastures, rather than *allowed* to lie down, to be incredibly powerful and provocative as I think it speaks directly to my own sense of call to ministry here at this church.

That said, what I would like to focus on today is the aspiration offered in the Psalm's closing verse: "and I will dwell in the house of the Lord...forever." When we consider the concept of "forever" we usually do so with our eyes firmly fixed forward into the future; imagining, with hope, belonging to such a place, unbound and eternal, which stretches to the horizon, and beyond; with our own place within it reserved and preserved. This morning, though, I would also ask us to swivel our head around to consider the forever from whence we have come and within which we currently abide; namely, this church of ours.

## **XI.**

Please understand, when I say "our church" I mean to say, *all* of us; those who constitute our fellowship in this day and age, those who created and maintained this fellowship *for* us in days gone by and ages past, and, course, those as of yet undiscovered souls who will carry our fellowship in the generations to come as a gift to us, as a gift to themselves, and as a gift to God.

Though we always consider ourselves to exist in the present moment of whatever era we occupy, the truth is we are a critical component of the ever-flowing stream of time; a stream which is, simultaneously, changing and eternal. That is to say we participate in eternity, we *create* eternity, with each and every change we bring, however fleeting; with eternity being both indifferent to such changes and utterly dependent on them. It is a process, a journey which has no end but is always arriving at its own destination. For all the rivers run to the sea but still it is not full.

## **XII.**

In some small way, Martha Manley is emblematic of the eternity which is crafted in the moment, and what it means to dwell in the house of the Lord... forever. Though given in remembrance of her husband Gilbert, it is Martha, herself, whom we remember most this day as our steeple bell is resurrected, re-dedicated and given new life. Intended as a gift for one age, the bell has also become a gift in a new age, for the purpose of honoring God in every age; those past, this present and that which will follow us in the future.

It is my hope, with each new Sunday, and every such fitting moment it is rung, the joyous sound of our steeple bell will be a reminder to us that here

in *this* house of the Lord we dwell eternally in company with sisters and brothers of our shared past; and, some day, with the people of the Park who shall come after us having heard the bell's invitation to worship and to share in the Gospel it proclaims.

### **XIII.**

I would like to end this today's sermon with a final historical anecdote. Early on, when the idea to "Swing the Bell" was first birthed, I was delighted to discover the letter written by Martha Manley which was read on the occasion of its dedication in 1901; the totality of which I included in the April newsletter. Her words were far more eloquent than any I could have crafted and, I believe, far more persuasive as to why, now, we should endeavor to get the bell up and swinging again.

I was puzzle, though, by the sentiment expressed toward the end of letter: "Altho I shall never hear its tones I feel that each Sabbath their echoes will penetrate the gloom of my darkened room, dispelling in a measure its inevitable clouds and perhaps revealing to me glimpses of its silver lining. May the gift be accepted as from a sincere and loving friend." - *Martha L. Manley*

### **XIV.**

After some exhaustive internet sleuthing, I discovered that for a great many years Mrs. Manly was afflicted with an unnamed malady which required her to live each day within the confines of her darkened room, with her husband, Gilbert, seeing to her care. I can only surmise that following his death Martha was moved from Canton in order another might provide her care.

Such circumstances make her gift to the church even more remarkable, as in all likelihood she never was able to hear for herself, the pealing of the steeple bell she provided. To which we can only say, "She hath done what she could," and that then, as now, hath done far more than she could have ever imagined.

## **XV.**

Martha Manley signed her letter, “*May the gift be accepted as from a sincere and loving friend.*” I can think of no better way to describe the current congregation here on the Park than as a fellowship composed of sincere and loving friends who offer the gift of our church to any who might receive it. Thank you Martha Manley, for the gift you have been to our congregation in years of yore, and will forever be so long as the voice of this bell is heard. Let any who hearth say come, and we shall dwell in *this* house of the Lord... forever. Amen.