

“Made To Lie Down”

Psalm 23

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.

Made To Lie Down

Psalm 23

November 26, 2023

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I.

I begin today by telling you a few things up front. First, I am glad to be back from my time off, second, there is *a lot* going on and, third, you are all making me *crazy*. The result being, I am feeling *incredibly* thankful these days.

Picking up where we last left off, it turns out that the problem with my table saw had nothing to do with the saw itself, and everything to do with the switch which had burned out. If I had known *then* what I know *now* I could have had the saw back up and running in about 10 minutes. As John Belushi famously said, “But *noooooo!*” I had take apart the entire saw, remove the motor, and drive it to Lawton Electric just so they could tell me the motor is fine and that it almost certainly was the switch. Which it was, which I then confirmed by merely removing a few screws and taking a hard look to discover what was really going on, rather than assuming there was much more to the problem than was in fact the case.

II.

Which is how I found myself Monday morning walking out of Lawton Electric with the new switch they had ordered me. As I pulled out of their parking lot onto the Hardscrabble Road, it finally dawned on me (after driving past it for, now, the *6th* time) that the Flackville cemetery right next store is where Lorna Webb is buried.

So, on a cold but bright and sunny morning I turned into the cemetery wondering if I could find Lorna’s grave, which I did almost immediately. Though I had too many things to do that day (remember, I told you there is *a lot* going on) I took more than a few minutes of quiet to stand before her grave marker with her name, Bill’s name, and their anniversary date, June 15, 1957, etched upon it. I remembered Lorna, and recalled all the joy she brought to her family, our church, this community (especially the C&CP) and, most poignantly in that moment, to me. After awhile, I got back in the car and drove right over to the Bill’s home for an unannounced visit.

III.

To say that Lorna's death, and the ensuing past few years have been difficult for Bill would be a profound understatement. One of the remarkable things I've learned over the past 30 years of ministry is how grief affects people differently. For Bill, grief manifests not as a sudden pang, or a debilitating gush, but as a constant drizzle which seeps down into the bones. Coupled with his own not insignificant health issues, Bill's daily climb has become heart-achingly steep.

I was reminded of all of this Monday as I waited for Bill and his caregiver to finish the morning routine and join me in the kitchen for a visit. It was one of those moments in life when you long for a magic button to press so as to make everything all better for those we love and cherish. A longing which seems to be arising in me with increasing frequency these days; disturbingly so, and part what is making *you* make *me* crazy (more on that in a bit).

IV.

After Bill sat down we had a good visit, as we always do; though shorter, as he confessed he usually took a little nap at that point in the morning. After I brought him up to speed on what is happening at the church, the new sign, sale of the Selleck land with plans to use the proceeds to create a space for the kids and youth of our church, and preparations for Advent, Bill spoke of the larger Webb family and, finally, he shared with me how *he* is doing these days.

As is the case for most of us, the race gets very hard to run at the end, and it certainly has become so for Bill. Which made what he said next all the more remarkable. While not at all surprising, I (once again) never saw it coming: Bill told me how grateful he is for his life and, in his words, for everything the Good Lord has given to him. I will tell you, this made me sit right back in my chair and say, "Huh?!?"

V.

All week, I have been thinking a great deal about my visit with Bill, and his deep and abiding sense of gratitude which he shared with a humble honesty that humbled me. While made all the more poignant in the days leading up to Thanksgiving, the greater truth is that of late I seem to more easily find the fault lines in the future than bask in bounty of what surrounds me.

While we each have our own reasons to be grateful to God and to team with our own sense of thanksgiving, I surmised that Bill's gratitude arises from three distinct areas which are not only commendable but, moreover, quite instructive for us today.

First, it is clear that Bill's sense of gratitude arises out of well-worn habit. It is not a calculation or an assessment, but a posture and an expectation. Like not needing to think too awfully hard in order to decide the sum of one plus one. Having done the calculation a 1,000 times before, the conclusion is reached almost instantaneously, and with little effort, thought, or fanfare; it simply becomes an accepted truth and guiding principle.

VI.

Second, gratitude arises from attaining sufficient perspective. While we typically understand such a perspective as a result of the "long view" which naturally develops as a benefit of growing older, a sufficient perspective is also gained by being compelled to take a "hard look" at life in having faced various trials and tribulations at some point along the continuum that is life.

Beyond these two routes by which one attains a sufficient perspective so as to give rise to gratitude, one quantitative and the other qualitative, there is a third course that might also deliver us to the promised land of gratitude: the "close-up" shot. That is, the decision to open our eyes, and our hearts, to the goodness and bounty that surrounds us all the time in every moment and instance of life. In my estimation, Bill's sense of gratitude is a function of each of these; the long view of time, the hard look of experience and close-up of intentional awareness.

VII.

Finally, gratitude may arise in a third way: from a certain confidence that all we have, and all that for which we hope, is not a function of luck, or fate or even hard work, but arises from an utter and absolute trust in the source from which all of our blessing flow: that is, Christ.

Given today's sermon text, the 23rd Psalm, we may rightly understand Christ as Shepherd who takes full responsibility for the flock and every member of it, providing all we need so that we do not want. One who takes us to a place of bounty and safety and *compels* us to stop and rest, to lie down

and enjoy. Who secrets us away from the busyness and rush of the world to the peace and hush of still water such that our souls are restored. Who leads along a path that is virtuous and right, such that we might fear no evil; even when that path might carry us through the realm of shadow and death. One who is ever present with us, offering the comfort of rod and staff as we make our way through the wilderness.

VIII.

This shepherd maintains a place for us, even in the midst of those who would do us harm, anointing us with oil to claim us and allow us to realize that *our* cup overflows with a goodness and a mercy which will follow us all the days of life; even to the last day, when we dwell in the house of our Lord... *forever.*

I am sure that for most, if not all of us, the 23rd Psalm is a great comfort as it has been for the untold generations which have come before us. However, the pastoral scene evoked by the Psalm with its image of the Good Shepherd, as compelling as it may be, is a sort of lowest hanging fruit of hope; a mere gateway to the larger realm of gratitude which lies beyond. With that in mind, this morning, as a means of maturing and deepening our faith, I would challenge us to shift from the image of Christ as Shepherd to that of Christ as King.

IX.

Understanding Christ as King and not merely a Shepherd is a far greater leap to make than you might first imagine. Much of this has to do with our history stretching back to colonial days, our sense of rugged individualism born of a frontier mentality, and the ideals of democracy upon which our nation was founded and to which we endeavor, still, to fulfill. Against that backdrop, the idea of being subject to a king is rather unappealing. When we think “king,” we think taxation without representation, or the latest season of “The Crown,” or Elvis and his sequin jump-suits and blue suede shoes.

Worse, the notion of a king rightfully entitled is too often tainted by those who “would-be”: aspiring autocrats or actual despots who fabricate and evoke “black sheep” so as to pit one flock against another in order to benefit from the inevitable shear or slaughter which was always the only purpose for their rule from the onset.

X.

To be clear, dictators and tyrants, would-be or otherwise, have no semblance whatsoever to a king who guards the entire realm to the benefit of every subject belonging to any flock. Even one such as you, or one such as me: *whoever* and *however* we may have been born to be or aspire to become.

Whereas imagining Christ as Shepherd is fairly easy for us, and even somewhat inviting, the idea of Christ as King is a notion which challenges our sensibilities and calls us to stretch our faith in new ways. Speaking personally, I can tell you while I welcome any opportunity for a little shepherding in my life and to be led to lie down beside still water, I have never been one to “bend the knee.” If I am being honest, though, there is nothing I would relish more than to stand in front of one who was *worthy* of my knee being bent; one so wise, so compassionate and so powerful that they would *make* me lie down.

XI.

Oh, what a comfort *that* would be, and one I think we each would relish in the secret and hidden places of our heart. This, then, is the challenge before us today on Christ the King Sunday, and in every day along our journey through this world: seeing Christ not just as *our* King, but also as the King who rules the entire cosmos.

In the liturgical year, Christ the King Sunday ushers in and welcomes the season of Advent. Frankly, I have always considered its arrival as a kind of minor moment that is greatly overshadowed by the events which follow: the angel, the magi, the shepherds, the cattle lowing, and the baby born in a manger to parents on the run; all that is wonderful and warming about Christmas. Just as understanding Christ to be the Good Shepherd is a relatively easy notion to embrace, even more so is seeing Christ as infant lowly, infant holy.

XII.

In all this, though, we should not lose sight of the fact, that such a child has been born to be *King*; not just of the Jews, but of *all* of us; all that was, all that is, and all that will ever will be. Though it arrives at various and

unpredictable times, there comes a moment in each person's faith journey when we have the opportunity to understand Christ beyond Bethlehem, past prophet and teacher and, even, later than the love of the cross so as to come to accept Christ not just as Savior, but as King.

I have spent a lifetime devoted to trying understand the virtue and value of our faith in Christ and I will tell you what I have learned. It all comes down to something which is stunningly simple: the belief that it, and everything, is going to be okay. I know, not fancy; but what an *awesome* sight when you see it at work and in real life. Like I what I saw Monday morning sitting at the kitchen table with Bill Webb.

XIII.

What I have witnessed through my relationship with Bill, is a person who knew now, what he did not know then. A person who took a hard look and realized the problem, whatever that was, is, or will be, is much easier to overcome than we assume or fear. A person who, through faith, came to understand all the things that we *think* are problems really are no problem at all. All because Christ is King.

Finally, then, we come to the crazy part. For 25 years now, we have been walking this journey together. Over that span of time, and increasingly so over the past couple of years, I have been witness to the profound courage each of you possess, and the incredible effort everyone of you is making to accept and to understand Christ as King.

XIV.

Bill Webb is but one example, one manifestation. I could, *literally*, write a sermon such as this about each and everyone of you; and, if I keep hanging around like this, I might just do that. Today, though, it has been Bill's turn.

Unfortunately for me, however, bearing witness to all of this in Bill, and in every person in our church, makes me *crazy*, because it means *I* have to work just as hard as each of you to understand Christ not just as Shepard, or Child of Wonder, or Savior, but as King. My knee is bent, you have made me to lie down; thank you. Amen.