

Psalm 23

Acts 9:36-43

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

May 8, 2022

Present and Personal

I would imagine that most of us here have had a good bit of exposure to the 23rd Psalm, our suggested reading from the Psalms for this morning. Maybe for some of us it was one of our memory verses when we were in a middle school confirmation class. Maybe the words of the Psalm take us to the memorial service for one we love. Maybe, for you, the words just naturally come out in a song. Or maybe, it is the passage from scripture that is accompanying you *right now* through your own green pastures or darkest valleys.

I read a commentator recently who suggested that the reason this Psalm is so powerful for us is that it is both present and personal. Present in that most all the verbs, the action words here, are in the present tense: the Lord *is* my shepherd, who *leads* and *restores*, *comforts*, *prepares*, *anoints now*. And personal: the Lord is *my* shepherd, *I* fear no evil, you prepare a table for *me*, *I* shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.¹ There is an intimacy and immediacy about this Psalm that brings God close in a way that both comforts and empowers.

As I prepared for this morning, reading through the suggested texts for the day, there was another passage that took hold of me as well though and would not let me go. It was this story from Acts that we read together this morning. The book of Acts always pulls me in. It too seems so present and personal.

Each year on the Sundays following Easter our suggested scripture readings for worship take us on a journey through the book of Acts. The book, officially titled The Acts of the Apostles, is most commonly understood to be written by the same person who wrote the gospel of Luke. There is some difference of opinion on the authorship, but it is often seen, in a sense, as Luke's 'part two' of the story of God's saving work in the world through the person of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Luke is the story of the life and ministry of Jesus. Acts is the story of what happens next.

¹ William F. Brosend, *Feasting on the Word*, year C, vol. 2, pg. 437.

The writer of Acts paints a vivid picture of the people and the times of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas at the time of Jesus. If we let our imaginations go we can almost feel the dust on our feet, the push and shove of the people in the market place, the taste the meals shared around a common table when we read from Acts.

We see here in the stories of Acts that the ‘what happens next’ following the resurrection of Christ, is born and grows out of an ordinary group of people in the midst of life not that unlike our own. For centuries Christian communities like ours here at Stone Church of Willow Glen have lifted lessons from the pages of Acts regarding how to live together as a community; handling disputes when they arise, listening for the Spirit for guidance, setting up systems for meeting the needs of congregation members and the larger community. Deacons are born in the book of Acts. Acts is the book that in many ways, gives us guidance on how to be Christians today.

It is the ordinariness, the familiarity, the intimacy of the setting of Acts that makes the stories and events of Acts all the more powerful. We see that it is right there in the midst of peoples’ lives, *their* personal and the present, that the Holy Spirit comes and moves and brings life. This morning’s story, of Tabitha and Peter is a vivid example of this.

The book of Acts begins with some sweeping narrative before it gets down to the personal. First there is the ascension of Jesus. The disciples gathered in Jerusalem following the reports of the resurrection. And, Acts 1 says, that for 40 days Jesus, “presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs speaking to them about the kingdom of God.”

Finally, the story says, the faithful asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” They were expecting an imminent second coming, when God would bring the kingdom as they knew it, the land, the power, the authority, back to God’s chosen people. Jesus responded to this, ‘it is not for you to know the times, but you will receive the power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses here in Jerusalem and throughout the world.’ *You* will be God ‘present and personal’ in the world. And then it says, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of sight.

Next comes the story of Pentecost, which we will celebrate in a few weeks. After the Ascension the followers were waiting, praying and wondering, I imagine, about what the power of the Holy Spirit would look like. One day when they were all together in Jerusalem it happened. “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like

the rush of a violent wind.” And the Holy Spirit was upon them and within them and they began, *just began mind you*, to understand that all of this was not an end but a beginning.

The book of Acts continues with the story of how the Holy Spirit worked in that community and the lives of those people. Our passage for this morning tells a story of Peter (Remember Peter? The disciple about whom Jesus said, ‘on you I will found my church’. He was ‘the rock’, and also the one who denied even knowing Jesus the night before he was crucified. Followers of Jesus are a complex bunch, aren’t we?)

Peter here is doing some missionary work, sharing the news of Jesus Christ. The verses just preceding what we read say Peter went, ‘here and there among the believers’.

In today’s passage we find Peter healing in the name of Jesus in the town of Lydda. The faithful in Joppa, near by, has just lost a dearly loved member of their community. They heard Peter was near and so they send for him. Maybe he could give them some comfort and prayers in their time of grief.

What happens next is a miracle story certainly. Where there was death now there is life. It is an unusual miracle story though, both for what is included and what is left out. We hear no mention of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. The presence of God seems to be inferred through Peter. And there are no witnesses, other than Tabitha. It says Peter excluded the mourners from the upper room.

And then there is all the detail about Tabitha. She was a disciple. In fact, this is the only place in all of scripture where the Greek word for disciple is given in the feminine form. She led a welfare program in Joppa, providing for the powerless and unprotected of her day. And she was a friend, deeply loved by many. She was clearly a leader in her church.

The story is so real and down to earth. It is almost as if we are there in that home in Joppa. Weeping with the widows at the loss of this woman so respected and so loved. And then Peter came and spoke to her and Tabitha, who was dead, is now alive.

We could debate exactly what happened that day in the upper room in Joppa. But for the Christians in the time of Acts the answer is clear: God was there, present and personal, through the message of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy

Spirit in the person of the man, Peter and there was life again. Where all life and hope had gone away, there was life once more. Through Jesus Christ life abounds. Hope abounds. Resurrection happens. New life happens. Right here in our midst.

This Easter season 2022, our present, we know well places where life and hope seem no more. Where, like Tabitha, voices for peace and compassion seem to be dying while fear and suffering and injustice ravage on. We see the news about refugees without a place to go, political battles that seem to only tangle us further into mistrust and animosity. War. Violence. Prejudice. Injustice. Fear. And, like the widows, in Joppa, we weep.

Our passages for this morning, the 23rd Psalm and the story of Peter and Tabitha remind us again that the death and hopelessness we may feel are not the end of the story. In Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit among us, we know God, present and personal. And that makes all the difference. In the ordinary people and events of our lives, the Peters among us, even sometimes with in us, Christ comes, life comes, resurrection happens. Miracles happen.

This is the message of Easter. This is the good news of these texts. Through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, God at work through Peter, through you and me. God is present and personal. And miracles can and do happen. Where there is no hope, hope is renewed. Where there is pain and suffering, injustice and death life comes again.

This Easter season and always, may we hear and see this truth, receive it ourselves. And may we also proclaim and live it with our lives.