

October 9, 2011

**The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi

Psalm 23

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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What is true for you?

When the rug is ripped out, when the stuff hits the fan, when all else fails, when you can't remember where to turn, what remains as Truth, tested and lasting?

There are lots of things in which we mere mortals put our faith: money, government, jobs, modern medicine, colleagues, our parents, our kids. These are the baskets into which we put our eggs and, for some of us, some of these things are a part of what is good and holy and true in the world.

So what is it that is true for you?

Many of you, I am sure, have heard the NPR series "This I believe" where people across the country and through generations have written short essays about what they consider to be essential truths. There are tens of thousands of essays in the archives, about parenting, the golden rule, science, mental health, medicine, love. The subjects run a deep, wide gamut.

But the authors have all identified for themselves what they believe to be Truth. It is a harder question than I want it to be. It is hard to pin down truth. And truth, if This I Believe is any indicator, is different for everyone.

After studying the scripture this week, I think my own "This I believe" essay would be about Psalm 23. I believe in the complicated truth of this beloved Psalm.

There is a painting hanging in my house by the artist John August Swanson. It was a Christmas gift from my husband and I love it dearly. It is a rendering of Psalm 23 in rich, bright colors. The star-speckled night sky covers the top half of the painting and the bottom half is full of tiny complicated detail. There is a quiet body of water, tall, shadowy trees and a forest full of animals of every stripe from lions to peacocks, mostly sleeping.

Right in the middle are two people arm-in-arm, carrying lanterns that cast a golden circle of light on their sure faces, lighting the path in front of them, illuminating whatever might lurk in the dark night around.

Their Truth, I think is in that light.

The light is, in the lovely metaphorical way that painters and poets and psalmists can get away with, the selfsame Lord that our Psalmist talks about in this morning's Psalm.

Psalm 23 is, without a doubt, the most well known of all the psalms. I'm sure it is in the top ten of most memorized scripture passages of all time. Folks that don't even profess to know any Bible know this one.

We hear it a lot at funerals, often alongside this morning's passage from Isaiah. It is a natural choice for funerals because it reminds us that we are accompanied, always, by a God that comforts us, always. Shepherd imagery doesn't really float my theological boat, but I give it a pass in this one, so beloved is the sentiment, so deeply ingrained in every Christian's consciousness.

There is a profundity in Psalm 23 that transcends its commonality. Maybe that's why it is so popular. It expresses one of those fundamental truths I mentioned earlier: God is with us. We are accompanied and, if we listen, guided into paths of right living.

But I think it is more than that. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is comforting, yes. It reminds us that the God in which we believe is a comforter and a provider, strong when we are weak, brave when we are scared.

But today's Psalm does not lead us into a delusional world of false expectations. "Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death," our faithful Psalmist prays, acknowledging that the valley still exists, even in a world where a good God reigns.

God "sets a table in the presence of my enemies", reminding us that, while God may set the table, it is our duty to sit there, to feast surrounded by, possibly even dining with, those who make us most uncomfortable, those who threaten us, those who shake our very foundations.

God our shepherd, with rod and staff, steady presence and gentle hand, does not promise a life free of worry, anger or sadness. There is no question that every one of us will indeed walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and I'm willing to bet that most of us already have. We do not, any of us, leave that valley unscarred. Death of those we love, even with all the promises of the Gospel, even with the ultimate knowledge of the resurrection, bruises and batters those of us left living.

God our shepherd, with well-appointed table full cup and anointing oils, does not promise a life free of conflict. We are called to live lives of integrity, to own our mistakes and ask forgiveness when we offend. We are also called to offer forgiveness when we are hurt, again and again and again. We all have people who challenge us. We are all called into relationship with them, perhaps to sit at table in their presence.

Psalm 23 speaks these difficult truths, that death and heartbreak are still part of a life of faith. It doesn't gloss this over. But it does remind us of an even greater truth: that we are never, ever alone.

This is why, of course, this psalm is so beloved across disparate Christian denominations. No matter where you are in your faith journey, no matter what you believe about the essence and nature of the Divine, we can all take as a core truth, a deep and holy truth, that God is with us, not to remove pain and sadness, but to mitigate them, to accompany us through them, to hold us, carry us, guide us and love us, as we mourn and as we feast.