

The 23rd Psalm

Oak Grove Presbyterian

July 29, 2018 Pastor Alika Galloway

It is a joy to be here So Bill called me and asked me if I would come and preach. I'm always eager to come and be with you and so I said yes. I looked at the lectionary text, but I decided that I would preach from the 23rd Psalm. And the reason being is one that it is dear to my heart but I always like to challenge myself to find a new word in an old text. So I went back to the 23rd Psalm and I did all my academic stuff with it. I studied it and I tried to find contemporary theologians, exegetes (experts) and Biblicists to see if there was a new word for a very contemporary day. What is the Word now, Lord, for us regarding the 23rd Psalms? So I looked and I took extensive notes and I began to ponder those. Then I did something kind of suspicious -- I began to pray about it. And as I prayed about it, I said, "Lord, I appreciate all of the good writing and all of the good" (as an academician I'm always glad to hear something scholarly and so it was thrilling for me) but specifically I asked, "what is the Word of God out of the 23rd Psalm, what is David saying, what should we take away from that." I then began to ponder and pray and ponder and pray and ponder and pray and ponder and pray about this thing.

Now I want to tell you - I'm sure that there are some "head" folks among us today and among God's family. One of the ways you can tell when a preacher is struggling is by their sermons. So those of you who are well trained in the psychological arts and are mental health professionals, if you want to know how well or how crazy we are, read our sermons. True. Because there's always going to be something in it that tells you. And the process is always very revealing, even to we who are writing it. As we begin to talk about it, and talk about it with the spirit, we begin with a divine revelation that kind of acts as a mirror to us.

So as I was praying and processing and pondering I asked God, “show me *me* in this Word.” Because I want to come to you in my most authentic self. I don’t want to come to you with my degrees, I want to come to you with authenticity because it is *there* that the human mind and human heart and human spirit begin to connect - it is within our most authentic self. As I began to ask God, “Reveal this Word for me so that if there is a Word for your people at Oak Grove, we can understand it together.”

Then I began to find myself going down a path I didn’t expect: Why did the shepherd do all that hard work? I had to ask myself that. Why did the shepherd work so hard? Because according to Maslow’s pyramid, the shepherd did everything that we need to survive. The shepherd prepared the food. The shepherd led them to water. When they were afraid, the shepherd took care of them, cuddled them, made sure that they were nurtured. When the enemy came, the shepherd beat the enemy back. Everything the shepherd anoints comforts the sheep. Why did the shepherd do all of that?

From the little bit that I know about shepherding, I know that it was a difficult task. It was usually handed down from generation to generation. Tools and tasks were handed down from generation to generation. I also know that shepherds were despised – that’s the reason why the rest of the city was surprised when the angel went to get the shepherds when Jesus was born. They generally were not allowed to come into the city. They stunk. There were all kinds of rumors about their other behaviors. They were considered unclean. And they were of the servant class and really nobody wanted to be bothered with them. So even in that, why did they do all of that work? Because they were in such isolation, nobody really could tell whether they were doing that work or not. There was not a light beam on them. You know, they weren’t on social media. Why did they do all of that?

About 3 o’clock one morning – I really have come to hate that, when the spirit wakes me up at 3 -- it’s like, “Have you set your alarm?” I understand that God is eternal and that our scripture tells us He neither sleeps nor slumbers. But I do.

I do. And so I would like not to be woke at 3 a.m. And yet the spirit of my soul seems to wake me up at that time, and this is what I heard:

“The shepherd does the work because the shepherd loves the sheep.”

I said, “What?” And I began to have this dialogue. Apparently it was verbal because my husband Ralph said, “Alika, are you okay? Who are you talking to?”

So I got up. As a good wife, I went into the kitchen to continue the dialogue, because really, literally, it blew my mind! That’s where you psychological folks can get this because I’m the kid who never felt that I was loved. I’m the outsider. I’m that kid, so it’s really difficult for me to get that.

The spirit began to work on me like only the spirit can. The shepherd does that work, Alika, because the shepherd loves the sheep. It is not so that the shepherd won’t be disgraced. The shepherd loves the sheep. I began then, even early that morning, started to think about ‘what does love look like in this current age?’ What does it look like for me? Perhaps, what does it look like for you? What does love look like?

I finally went to bed and then got back up about 6 in the morning to my husband quizzing me, “now who exactly were you talking to at 3 o’clock? And if you would be so kind don’t talk to me again at 3 o’clock in the morning.”

I decided that I would have a conversation with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King about love, because he says that, even as he was beginning to make his transition into life eternal, when he began to plan his funeral (the stories tell us that MLK knew that his time was short). If you look at the latter years of his life, in those last years, he began to preach a little different. He began to teach a little different. And he said, “when it’s time for me to go, when God calls me home, tell them I tried to *love* somebody.” (You know all those folk who were surrounding MLK, were preachers and they said, “well Martin, what do you want us to say?” So they said that what he asked.) MLK wrote a book called *The Strength to Love*.

I began then to look at that as a companion, as an extra book in terms of what love looks like. He says this:

“Jesus had a marvelous ability to match words with action. One of the great tragedies of life,” he goes on to say, “is that we as humans seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession. Between doing and between saying.” He says that “a persistent schizophrenia leaves so many of us tragically divided against ourselves. On the one hand, we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but on the other hand,” he says, “we sadly practice the very antithesis of these principles. How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds!”

My Lord, what a morning! High principles. Low Deeds.

The Shepherd *loves* the sheep. Therefore the Shepherd feeds, the Shepherd leads, the Shepherd tends. The Shepherd loves the sheep. So what does the love life of the shepherd have to do with us now?

In this era, we are so divided against ourselves, that even the Koch brothers are beginning to question these turbulent times we live in. We are so divided against ourselves that we no longer see ourselves - not only as equals, but as God’s beloved, created in the image of God. We are suffering from a schizophrenia of being-ness. Of “*I* belong here, and *you* belong there, and we *don’t* belong together.”

Now it is easy for us to do an astute political analysis about what this means, but as Christians, before we engage the political and the social analysis, we must take a deep look into what kind of community we are creating based upon our *love* for one another. For scripture is clear, “for they will *know* that they are *mine* by their *love*.”

Are we in fact a schizophrenic God-called-out nation where we are no longer practicing what it means to be the sheep of God, nor the shepherd?

Now as God continued to talk to me about that, I was troubled about my own behaviors. Because when I’m watching CNN, I think – I usually I watch CNN

in my bedclothes. That's a good thing – you know like when you come home and you take off everything, you put your nightgown on, you eat something -- that's some good living. I'm sitting there watching CNN or MSNBC, even Fox News – and the things that come out of my mouth, and now have invaded my heart, are not exemplary. They don't always demonstrate that I am a sheep, nor am I a shepherd. We know that as Christians we are to be both. Because Jesus begins to talk with, during that wonderful passage where he reconciles himself to Peter he says, “now Peter, if you love me, you will,” what? “feed my sheep. Peter, if you love me, you will tend my lambs. Peter, if you love me, if you love me, you will be the shepherd. You will love my sheep. Alike, if you love me, you will love my sheep.”

Because MLK goes on to say that only love can conquer hate. Only love is the antithesis of what we must be today. It is the personification of our calling of God. Now...

If God is calling me to preach, I should study all day long. If God is calling me to teach (now I don't quite know what I would do with the stuff I was learning), but I should learn it anyway just for the joy of it. See the Holy Spirit oftentimes will basically put you in a position where, as MLK would say, your 'ought' has to mirror your 'is.'

So I studied. I'm prepared. I wrote it. And then my sister died. Unexpectedly.

I had to go last week to LA to bury my sister. I would have gone to San Bernardino, but because I had to do this unexpectedly – how many of you would get the cheapest ticket you can? That would be me -- I tried to get into Ontario, California, which is a little closer to San Bernardino and Riverside National Cemetery where we were going to bury my sister, Anora. But I couldn't get into Ontario so I said, “okay God, God, I'll go to LAX.” How many of you have travelled to LAX recently? Not a pleasant experience I'll tell you. So I fly into LAX. That was great. Get off the plane. Meet my brother. We cry for an hour and a half because this sister was beloved and her death was unexpected.

So we make it. It's 100 degrees. My brother says, "Alika, why do you have your window rolled down, it's a hundred degrees?" I said, "I'm storing up for the winter. You live in southern California, you don't have to store up, but we do." I had my arm out the whole trip, embarrassing my baby brother but I did not care.

You know, all the way, no problem. We buried Anora. I had a flight back the next day and I would be taking it from LAX to save the, you know, blah, blah,blah. He's my little brother so I say some crazy stuff to him -- big sisters say crazy stuff to little brothers -- and I said this crazy stuff. I get to the plane, and I have a bag and I hurt my knee. So I get in line and it just seems like there were hordes of people at LAX and part of it is because I was upset, but it just seems there were a lot of people there, people with families getting on the plane. So I said well what I'll do is I'll board early. Because I've got the bag, my knee is hurt -- I will board early so I'm not in the way trying to put the bag up and all of that.

While I'm walking, I say three prayers. Well, probably four. "God, in your mercy, could this plane stay up." Because I always pray that. Now those of you who don't [laughter]... "could you keep the plane afloat." Secondly, "Lord, please don't let me know anybody here." Because I don't want to talk. I really don't want to do it. Thirdly, "can the people who sit by me not say anything but hello. That's it." I don't want to talk on the plane. I don't want to talk on the plane. And then I say "just in case you didn't hear number one, could you keep the plane in the air. Amen." So that I can kind of shut my brain off and all that. Because while I'm burying my sister, my life in Minneapolis is still going on. I know there's going to be stuff on my desk, I've got stuff I need to do. I need to really concentrate.

They called the plane, you know, and we're starting to board. I'm trying to make my way, weave my way in between, trying to get up, you know, position myself a little early so that I won't get in anybody's way. I'm in line almost close, and, cuz the steward at the helper's desk, announces "those of you that need extra assistance, we will be boarding first in about 5 minutes after the Gold Club - I'm not a member of the Gold Club. I'm making my way. I'm standing

behind a whole bunch of people. Not trying to be rude. And the next thing I know, I feel, (and I don't have any sleeves on) I feel somebody grabbing my arm.

And I say, "now Lord, remember, in case you forgot, I prayed that I wouldn't know nobody here." I said, okay. Whoo! Okay.

I turn around, and there's this young blond-haired, blue-eyed woman . She's in her 20s. I'm going, well maybe, I don't know, I don't recognize her. But I smile. She says, "you don't have no business trying to get upfront of me like that."

I'd forgotten to pray the prayer about rude folks.

I said, "what did you say?"

Now remember, I just buried my sister. Not a good time to be rude. My heart is broken. I loved her. She and are 18 months apart. No way she should have died. No way.

And she went like this [pointing her index finger in Alike's face], "I am so tired of you people."

I'm looking at her. My father was a sailor. [laughter] I learned some words. And the words are preparing. I'm preparing to give her what I was taught. I almost got kicked out of kindergarten because I thought some of those words ... But I do this, I do this thing. I look at her. And I *smile* at her. I say, "darling, did your mother never teach you about stranger danger? She's looking. By then she's red, I'm still smiling.

I said, "Donald Trump has secret service agents that keep him safe. You don't. I would suggest to you that you control your behavior before you get hurt. Now I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going to pray for you." - And I'm *still* SMILING! - "I'm going to pray for you, but I would not" - and then I would whisper. My children know that that's my Methodism, I'm not a talker I'm a whisperer. Because my mother would [be whispering, 'I will break your neck'].

So then I'm whispering, and I said "don't do this again. You will end up hurt. And soon."

By then, a blond-haired, blue-eyed man grabs her by the shoulders. I can see him digging into her shoulder blades. "How does that feel? We don't conduct ourselves like this. You were wrong and you were rude. And you have to stop this kind of behavior, madam." And I [makes a striking gesture], I'm still *smiling*.

What occurred to me was that the challenge of Psalm 23 had invaded my spirit, and instead of hurting the sheep, I became the shepherd. Unknowingly, I practiced an ethic of love rather than an ethic of cuss and an ethic of hatred. I began to be invaded by the spirit of God and I began to shepherd this young woman in the midst of her pain, in the midst of her deception, in the midst of her turmoil so in fact she may have abundant life. I began to shepherd her. Because that's what happens when the Holy Spirit invades you and you become the shepherd as well as the sheep.

So I fed her with good words. I led her to a path of righteousness. So that her soul could be mended. And then I anointed her head with loving words.

So Pastor Alike, why are you here telling me this today? I am here simply because in this era of discontentment, our 'ought' and our 'is' must be together. You cannot conquer this type of perverse political system through hatred.

You must love one another. You must speak the truth in love. And we must *be* love, in order to tend the sheep.

Amen