

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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The 23rd Psalm: Last of Three III. A Table Before Us

Psalm 23

The Bible in Basic English 1 The Lord takes care of me as his sheep; I will not be without any good thing. 2 He makes a resting-place for me in the green fields: he is my guide by the quiet waters. 3 He gives new life to my soul: he is my guide in the ways of righteousness because of his name. 4 Yes, though I go through the valley of deep shade, I will have no fear of evil; for you are with me, your rod and your support are my comfort. 5 You make ready a table for me in front of my haters: you put oil on my head; my cup is overflowing. 6 Truly, blessing and mercy will be with me all the days of my life; and I will have a place in the house of the Lord all my days.

As Translated by Robert Alter 1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 In grass meadows He makes me lie down, by quiet waters guides me. 3 My life He brings back. He leads me on pathways of justice for His name's sake. 4 Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow, I fear no harm, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff- it is they that console me. 5 You set out a table before me in the face of my foes. You moisten my head with oil, my cup overflows. 6 Let but goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long days.

There are two verses in the 23rd Psalm that have always somewhat puzzled me. The first is that reference to the table that the Lord sets out. Jewish scholar Robert Altman's recent translation, which reviewers say is much closer to the original Hebrew poetry than many translations, says this: "*You set out a table before me in the face of my foes.*" The New Revised Standard's more familiar translation of that verse is "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies....*" And the first version that is printed in your bulletin and which we also looked at last week, from the Bible in Basic English, has something very different: "*You make ready a table for me in front of my haters.*" But why would God be wanting me to eat in the presence of my enemies or those who hate me? That's the first puzzle.

The second puzzling verse is the third one. In the New Revised Standard it's "*He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*" The Bible in Basic English has it "*he is*

my guide in the ways of righteousness because of his name.” And Alter’s translation says *“He leads me on pathways of justice for His name’s sake.”* But what does it mean to do something for the sake of someone’s **name**? It’s a very churchy phrase, but what does saying or doing something “for the sake of someone’s name” mean?

Yet as I have reflected this week once again on this Psalm and on these particular verses for this final sermon of this short series on the 23^d Psalm, I have come to realize that these verses are actually not puzzling, but profound, and are not unrelated but actually reinforce the very same point. Let’s see how that is

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies....” “You make ready a table for me in front of my haters.” What’s going on here? A hundred years ago, when I was in the second grade, I can distinctly remember finding myself embarrassed in front of the whole class in Miss Dean’s classroom in Ft. Worth, Texas. It was a Monday morning and I had made my regular weekend bicycle trip to the 7-11 to replenish my supplies of candy. I could always come back with quite a haul, since those were the days of penny candy. I snuck some of that candy to school on Monday. And during a particularly boring part of the day, I furtively fingered a blue jawbreaker and proceeded to slyly slip it into my mouth. Now, I suspect most of you have had a jawbreaker at one time or another. They’re hard to hide. They create this giant bulge in your cheek. And the blue one that I was quietly sucking on, or so I thought, made this inevitable line of blue drool down my chin that I tried to hide. But Mrs. Dean called on me to answer a question at one point. It’s hard to hide a blue jawbreaker when you’re trying to talk with the eyes of one teacher and 20-something classmates on you. Mrs. Dean was not fooled. And she called me up in front of the class and then said, *“Chuckie”* (a name I had tried very hard to suppress) *“it’s impolite to eat in front of everyone if you didn’t bring enough for everybody.”* Unfortunately, I **had** brought enough for everyone – and not only did she make me spit out my jawbreaker – which

landed with a forlorn metallic twang into the round, metal, standard school-issue trash-can – but she then proceeded to make me give a piece of candy to every pupil in the room, and thus completely exhausting what I had thought would be a week’s supply of candy. *“It’s impolite to eat in front of other people if you haven’t brought enough for everyone.”*

So why would God be feeding you or me in front of everyone? Particularly in front of people who are my enemies, people who might not wish me well. Isn’t that, at best impolite of God? Does God take some sort of pleasure in my embarrassment? No. Actually, the point is very different, I think. For I am also reminded of those other kinds of things that we may think or say when presented with a meal – or the need to eat – when things in our lives are such that we do not want to eat. I’m sure that you, like me, have had those times in your life when you said *“Oh, I am too nervous to eat... I am too upset to eat... I am too worried to eat.”* Am I right? Sometimes life can be wrenching or fearsome or anxious, and eating is the last thing you want to do. And I would also wager that at those times most of you have had a friend or a family member say to you *“But you have to eat.”* And they’re right. You do have to eat. For not eating makes things worse, doesn’t it? Being physically run down, being hungry (whether you know it or not) makes it that much harder to deal with whatever situation that is causing you to not want to eat, to deal with whatever enemies, as it were, that are facing you in that moment. Those enemies may be worry about a loved one who lies in a hospital bed, or concern about a family member whose life is a mess, or waiting for those test results, or a hundred other things that leaves your stomach shrunken and your soul shriveled. And that’s when God says, in essence, *“Sit down, you have to eat - even in the presence of these enemies you have to eat. I will feed you.”*

The central theme and affirmation of this Psalm, it seems to me is that, first, God is constant, and, second, that that constancy is always seeking our good. For it would

not be very comforting to have God a constant presence if God were a trickster or a sadist or took delight in provoking, annoying, or keeping us guessing. But God is constant in God's care and love for us. Even when we have done something that caused our distress, even when we have sinned and fallen short, even when it is by our own actions that we find ourselves trapped in worry, anxiety, guilt, or shame – and therefore don't feel like eating in the presence of those enemies to our self-worth and well-being – God is nonetheless there – offering us nourishment for the soul, nourishment for the mind, in the face of ideas that would harm us, nourishment for the body that would prefer to hide, would prefer not to take such nourishment or may even feel unworthy to. God is there, setting a table before us in the presence of all those things that would seek to harm us, that would be an enemy to us. That is the way in which God is constant. And story after story in scripture bears this out – from the manna that God offered every morning to the Hebrew people on their flight out of Egypt that we heard so much about last month to Jesus' implausibly but wonderfully feeding those 5000 lost and hungry souls with a few fish and a few loaves. *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."* Indeed.

Let's look at that other verse now: *"He leads me in right paths for his name's sake."* *"[H]e is my guide in the ways of righteousness because of his name."* *"He leads me on pathways of justice for His name's sake."* As I said, I've always found this formulation also somewhat puzzling. What does it mean for God to lead someone *"for his name's sake,"* or, perhaps even more puzzling, *"because of his name"*? If we think of similar phrases that we might say, we can imagine saying *"I'm doing this for Grandpa's sake."* We also may say, as a part of teaching children who they are or when chiding them for certain kinds of behavior *"You're a Blaisdell, and Blaisdells don't do that"* with the implicit understanding that if you bear a certain name, there are some

things you just do – or don't do – because of what that name means and what it stands for. Now I think we're getting somewhere.... We might say *"For the sake of my good name, I can't do what you're asking,"* or *"I must do this or that even if it's unpopular – for the sake of my good name."* We understand those usages, don't we? We've probably said something like them ourselves on occasion. They suggest that there is something about our integrity that is associated with our very name, and, as the saying goes, we wouldn't want to dirty our name, or cheapen our integrity by certain kinds of behavior.

And with that clue, we can say this: It is exactly the same with God. The folks to whom this Psalm was first written would have known that this phrases *"He leads me in right paths for his name's sake"* was actually a reference back to the story of what God had done in the Exodus, what God had done for Moses and the Hebrew people through the gift of the law and teachings and 10 commandments; they would have remembered that through these gifts, God had turned them from a motley group of refugees into a people, a community, a community with an identity and a mission.

When Moses stood before that Burning Bush in Sinai to receive God's commission to lead the people out of Egypt, God said to him: *"The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."* And Moses' initial response to God was, but *"If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"* And God's response, which has both engaged scholars and ordinary folks for 3000 years is this: *"God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'" He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

That's the story that the original hearers of the 23rd Psalm would have recalled. But what does it mean to say that God's name is *"I AM WHO I AM"*? And what would it mean that God is still leading David – still leading us – for the sake of that name. After

all, “*I AM WHO I AM,*” or as other scholars translate it, “*I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE,*”¹ just doesn’t seem terribly obvious, does it? And yet, obvious or not, the Hebrew phrasing here is meant to convey a very important truth and we can understand it in this way: You and I are particular beings, living in a particular time and place, with particular parents and siblings and friends, and we are influenced, we are changed, we are formed in our very identities by these ones and. Put another way, every human life is particular, finite, mortal, and imperfect. Every human life lives only in a particular time and place. Living in 21st century Colorado is very different from living in 13th century France, and who we are – our very name, as it were – is dependent on time and relationships and circumstance.

But the point of God’s name being “I am who I am; I will be who I will be” is that God **God** is not limited. Who God is and what God does **does not** depend on the kind of finite and mortal circumstances that unavoidably define **our** lives. God is God is God is God. God is who God is and will be who God will be. **God does not fail to be God, ever.** And that’s the point. That odd name of God shown to Moses, recalled by David in that phrase “for His names’s sake,” is a reminder to us that God will never, ever fail to be God in relationship to you, and me, and this world that God loves. Nothing will change God’s mind and intention to love and care for this world, even when God is disappointed in it, even when God is disappointed in you or me.

And you know what? That also brings us back to that table that God prepares even in the midst of our enemies, even the midst of our anxieties and fears that are the enemy of life abundant, even in the midst of mucked-up circumstances that may even be our own fault, God is there, constant, seeking to feed us, nourish us, replenish us, bring the good that is possible. Another way to say this is to say that God will never

¹There may be others who have such a translation but I heard it from Emeritus Professor Gerald Janzen, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana, while in seminary.

wants us to starve: spiritually, emotionally, intellectually or physically.

Which, my friends, is both our great hope and comfort, and our great commission, our great challenge. As ones who have indeed been fed by God in all these ways in the midst, sometimes, of pretty messy lives, God would also call us, in turn, for the same of His name and for the sake of that name “Christian” that we bear, to be shepherds who would feed the hopeless, who would feed the hungry, who would care about those who cannot eat because they are too oppressed, or too worn down and worn out, or who have no food – to set before these ones a table in the presence of those enemies of life that would weigh them down. And so, if you have been fed by God in these ways in your life, then God’s challenge and commission to you is to go and do likewise. And if you are already doing so, then God blesses you for that as you honor God’s very name and reflect God’s own integrity and intention. And if you suspect that you have turned a little too inward, and are less concerned with being a shepherd and feeding those whom you could help nourish, then there are countless ways that you could do that – and God will bless you for it and you will be a blessing to God.

So this week I would invite you to do two things: be even more aware than you already are that God has fed you always, even when those enemies of life seemed to surround you. And be on the lookout for lost sheep whose pastures are barren and who don’t know this good shepherd that we know. For you can feed them – for the sake of God’s name.