

**Comfort Table**  
*April 25, 2010*  
(Easter 4 – Year C)

Psalm 23

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!  
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

*Please be seated*

When I lived in the Washington DC area for my seminary training, I was required to spend one summer in a hospital setting and serve as a chaplain.

The hospital that I served in was the Washington Hospital Center, which had a very active emergency room and trauma center.

And when I was on-call in the trauma center, it was my job to go from bay to bay in the emergency room and to pray with patients and their families.

On one of my first on-call shifts, I pulled back the curtain in an emergency room bay to find a young man in his twenties, who had suffered a gunshot wound to his head.

Even as a novice in the emergency room, I could tell that his injury was most likely going to be fatal.

Gathered around this poor young man's bed were his mother and his girlfriend and his brothers and sisters, all in a large circle huddling around his bed and sobbing uncontrollably.

I introduced myself as the chaplain on call.

And I asked them if it was okay if I offered a prayer.

We all closed in, gathering close to the bed and to this young victim. And we held hands in a circle as I said a prayer.

With our hands still gripped tightly, I said "amen" to the prayer.

And then the victim's mother looked up at me with tears in her eyes and said:

"Pastor, will you please recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm for us?"

I tried to disguise my deer-in-headlights look and the lump that appeared in my throat - because I did not know the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm completely by memory.

I thought fast on my feet and then replied:

“Why don’t I start the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and then y’all join in with me?”

So, I began:

“The Lord is my shepherd.

I shall not want.”

And, thankfully, this beautiful and mourning family chimed in and covered me with grace - as we prayed this beautiful psalm together.

You can guess what I did that next day after my on-call shift was over. I went home and memorized the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

For many people, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm was memorized when they were in Sunday School or when they were growing up.

But nowadays, we rarely memorize much of anything, especially not verses from the Bible.

Memorizing scripture, as well as memorizing the preamble to the Constitution or the Gettysburg Address, has gone the way of the rotary telephone.

And yet, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which [we read] [the choir sang] this morning remains a huge source of comfort, for both Christians and for Jews. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, especially as it is translated in the King James Version of the Bible, still remains one of the most beautiful and comforting passages of all time.

I have reprinted this King James Version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm on the back of the worship leaflet this morning and I would like for us to read it, together.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*He restoreth my soul;  
He 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 annointest 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.*

This version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm has been memorized for centuries.  
And this is the psalm that so many families wanted me to recite in the  
emergency room in the face of a fatal accident.  
And this is the psalm that is still the most requested scripture reading, by  
far, to be read at funerals.  
And in this last week, when I asked people why, why do you think that  
this psalm is so universally requested, the answer was always the  
same:  
This is the most popular of all the psalms - because they are words of  
comfort.

And this morning, this psalm, this 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, is a comfort to me, mainly  
in these words:  
“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.”  
Or in the words of a more modern translation:  
“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me.”

As Episcopalians, we celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday.  
And it impossible for me to hear these words without visualizing the  
table upon which we are fed with bread and wine, the Body and  
Blood of Christ.  
And when I visualize God preparing a table before me in the presence of  
my enemies, I am reminded of a photograph that I saw many years  
ago.  
This photograph was taken during the Korean War.  
And the photograph shows a battlefield scene with battle worn soldiers  
with mud on their face and bandages on their arms.

And in their midst is a priest, standing in front of what looks like a folding card table.

This priest, who is dressed in battlefield fatigues, is also wearing a chasuble, the outer garment that I wear when I celebrate the Eucharist, the garment that looks like a big poncho.

And this priest, in the midst of the battlefield, is preparing to give these soldiers communion.

And he is lifting up a silver chalice, a shiny chalice that the sunlight has caught so that a burst of light is streaming from the chalice.

Anyone who has had contact with the military automatically understands the severity of lifting up a silver chalice near enemy lines.

This silver chalice could certainly give away the location of the troops to the enemy.

Yet, even in the midst of battle, the priest continues to spread a table in the presence of the enemy.

We sometimes forget when we come to church each Sunday to receive the bread and wine that we are in the midst of a battle.

Yet the comfortable words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm tell us that God does not wait for the battle to be over in order to spread out a feast for us.

God spreads a table before us, in the presence of our enemies.

And our enemies are not really enemies of the military variety.

Our enemies are those things that trouble us,

Our enemies are those things that worry us,

Our enemies are those things that make us afraid.

And in the presence of those enemies, God spreads a table before us, a feast of bread and wine.

For while we are worried about the results of a mammogram, God goes ahead and spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies.

While we are troubled by living from paycheck to paycheck, God goes ahead and spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies.

While we are afraid of growing old and alone, God goes ahead and spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies.

In the middle of the battlefield, God goes ahead and lays out bread on a card table and lifts up a silver chalice and feeds us right under the nose of our enemy.

I encourage all of us to memorize the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

For then, when we gather around the bedside of a loved one, we will have those comfortable words ready at a moment's notice.

And when we gather around this Table, in the midst of the battlefield of life, we will remember God's promise of comfort:

Thou preparest a table before me, in the presence of mine enemies.

AMEN.

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