

Sunday October 12th

Readings

Isaiah 25:1-9

1 O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. **2** For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. **3** Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. **4** For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, **5** the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. **6** On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. **7** And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; **8** he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. **9** It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Psalm 23

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. **2** He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; **3** he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. **4** Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me **5** You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. **6** Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Philippians 4:1-9

1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. **2** I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. **3** Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. **4** Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. **5** Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. **6** Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. **7** And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **8** Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is

commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. **9** Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Matthew 22:1-14

1 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: **2** "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. **3** He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. **4** Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' **5** But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, **6** while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. **7** The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. **8** Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. **9** Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' **10** Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. **11** "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, **12** and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. **13** Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' **14** For many are called, but few are chosen."

Sermon – The God Who Rescues

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

So, funny story. Knowing that we had family coming into town, I started working on my sermon early this week. I knew I'd need to have everything in order by Thursday afternoon to spend some quality time with loved ones and to still be well prepared for today. Fortunately, everything went smoothly, and by Thursday morning, the sermon was done. All I had to do was review on Saturday and get ready for Oktoberfest!

Then, while I was grocery shopping on Saturday, I was on the phone catching up with one of my

friends, who is a pastor in NC. He was talking about how much trouble he had preparing a sermon with this Sunday's scriptures, especially with the Gospel passage in mind.

As he recounted Jesus' parable about the wedding feast, my heart sank to the floor of Kroger's dairy department. I realized that I had prepared a sermon with the wrong lectionary passages in mind. All of my reading, writing, exegesis – that's a fancy theological word for interpretation – it all was for next Sunday's readings. The good news, of course, is that next week's sermon is written! But Saturday, at 1:15 in the afternoon, I had nothing for this morning.

Fortunately for us – and in this case, fortunately for me – God is a God of rescue, and we hear that in

both of today's Old Testament readings. Since we sing the paraphrases every Sunday, we don't often hear the fullness of the Psalm text. So, let me read to you the entirety of our psalm from today. It should be familiar. *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."*

How often have we heard this? Over and over again, Psalm 23 may be the most quoted piece of Scripture in the American religious landscape.

Funerals and weddings and graduations and a slew of other life events seem soaked with references to the 23rd Psalm. But, what if it is also deeply misunderstood? The first part is simple enough. God is our shepherd. God provides for us. God restores us and leads us, and because God is present, we need not fear.

But the next part? We often just gloss over. **Your ROD and your STAFF, they comfort me.** We may just pass this by, but it helps us to know what kind of shepherd God is, because it speaks to how God rescues us.

When you heard rod and staff, what do you think of? Maybe a royal scepter, that God's rule comforts us? But, shepherds don't use scepters. Maybe something like Poseidon's trident or Thor's hammer, not only a mark of power but a powerful weapon that God uses to defend us from attacks by others? Well, shepherds don't use tridents. The rod and the staff are integral tools to the kind of leadership a shepherd offers.

A shepherd's rod was just a long, thick stick, about as tall as the shepherd. Imagine something like Old Man River's walking stick. The staff was similarly sized, but with a large hook on it. Today we typically call them a shepherd's crook. Rather than signifying a royal rule, these are simply tools of simple people.

They're entirely ordinary, so there's not much extraordinary comfort coming from that. What is it about the rod and the staff that inspire such comfort?

Perhaps it is because, like Poseidon's trident, shepherds would use the rod and staff to guard the flock against predators, to chase away the lions and wolves that would seek to make lunch out of the weak and vulnerable in the flock. The rod and the staff are a part of the shepherd's method of rescuing the flock from predators, so surely, this is the fullness of what the psalmist meant by comfort, right?

Well, not entirely, because these attacks by predators, while deadly, aren't a daily occurrence.

The rod and the staff have a much more common usage.

If y'all have ever spent time around flocks of sheep, you'll quickly notice how fickle they are when it comes to food. Sheep love to travel together because the group provides safety and warmth against the elements. But as sheep feed on green grass, their attention goes away from the flock and focuses upon the ground. They'll nibble here, and nibble there, and follow the food source with their eyes to the ground, noses full of the fresh meadow, and entirely content with a mouthful of pasture.

The problem with this is that sheep, when left to their own devices, will easily wander away from the flock, away from the safety of the gathered group,

away from the warmth of the family unit, and they have wandered themselves into loneliness and deep vulnerability.

Here is where the rod and the staff most often appear. Shepherds would use the rod to hit the sheep's outer flank to redirect them back toward the flock. It was a tool to guide them back into the safety and warmth of the community. When our selfishness inspires us to wander, God's rod corrects our missteps, sometimes uncomfortably, but also turns us toward the safety God's protection, the warmth of God's community. The daily occurrence is not danger at the hands of a predator, but danger brought on by our own selfishness.

But sometimes sheep will fight over the same patch of grass. Sometimes, because their noses are so focused on the meadow in front of them, sheep live in fear of scarcity, and so fight with one another for the most plentiful of resources, grass. And here's where the staff comes in. The shepherd will use this crook, this hook, wrap around the sheep's neck and pull their heads up, not only keeping them from harming one another, but helping them to see the bounty of available food. This is a correction that also pulls sheep back into community, for it corrects the wrong perspective that there's not enough to go around. The daily occurrence is not danger at the hands of a predator, but danger brought on by our own selfishness.

The good shepherd, God our shepherd, leads us to green pastures and still waters that restore our souls. There's always enough here.

So, you see, God is a god of rescue, but most often, we need rescued from ourselves. This week, in my rush to get ahead, I actually got behind.

Fortunately, through a friend, God provided a hook that pulled me back into the life of the community and corrected my mistakes. Isaiah pushes this promise of rescue even further, saying that the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, that God will take away the disgrace of his people, that God will swallow up death forever. Wherever we are, whatever the problem may be, God is at work to rescue us.

For us, God's rescue is sometimes a rod and a staff – a correction of our own selfishness. Sometimes God's rescue is a shoulder to cry on in the midst of our despair – a fellow sufferer who offers true empathy. Sometimes God's rescue is a redemption from the feelings of disgrace and shame within our lives – a beloved who takes us as we are, and looks at us as we ought to be.

But at all times, we have the promise that God is the God who rescues us from death. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God rescued us from the finality of death, and instead gave us a promise of eternal life, a hope that death will never have the last word. Nothing – no our mindless wanderings, not our selfishness, not our shame or

tears – nothing can break us away from this promise, from the love of God that assures us of our eternity with Christ.

So what does this mean? In the life of our community, we must remember that there will be times when we need rescued, not only from predators or enemies, but from ourselves. Sometimes we need the rod and the staff, the hard words that lead us into reconciliation, the correction that returns us to the safety and warmth of God's love found in our community. When we wander off with our noses obsessed with what we want, God is a god of rescue, even when we need rescued from ourselves. When we fight one another because we are afraid there is not enough, the Lord will lift our heads away from

conflict and toward the green pastures and still
waters. God is a God of rescue, and God will always
restore our souls. Amen.