Topic: The Good Shepherd (Easter 3, Lectionary B)

Scripture: Psalm 23, Acts 4:5-12, John 10:11-18

Hymns: 50 the Lord’s My Shepherd, vu326 O For a Thousand Tongues, vu325 Christ Is Made

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Let’s take a moment to pray…

Mighty God, we thank you for your Holy Scriptures. We would be lost without them, they are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our pathway – and when we stray from them, we stray from You. O God, this is your revelation of who You are, of your directives to your church and your people. We do well to study Your word, and to dig in deep, and truly take in what you are teaching us. Help us today, O God. We want to hear the Holy Spirit. We are trusting, we are praying in the Spirit, and we ask in Jesus name, that your Holy Spirit would illumine these pages – that it fill the words of the preacher and the listener alike, and that we may know that today we have met with the living God. For we pray these things in Jesus name, amen.

Augustine of Hippo, infamous theologian of the 4th Century located in the North African region of the Roman Empire, wrote “We are restless until we rest in God”. We humans are restless in many ways… but chief among them is that we are constantly restless about the future.

This is why we save up money, why we invest in retirement funds and accounts, it’s why we go to college or university - so that we will secure our future through employment and work. People who are older, perhaps coming to grips with a terminal diagnoses are often restless about what comes after this life.

God, so good that He is, has known about our curiosity with fearing about the future since we were taking our first steps outside the Garden of Eden. Cain, distraught over his future with God and in the world, slays his brother Abel in a furious rage trying to secure his place.

Since then, God has been hard at work trying to get us humans to see just how secure our future is with Him. But our hearts worry, our minds churn and ruminate, our logic tries to grapple with the divine and we see conflict, we see uncertainty.

And so God lays it out for the Psalmist, who writes in a scant fifty-five words one of **the** most beloved texts of the Scriptures… Psalm 23. When you are anxious about your future, this is the Psalm that gets recommended to you.

We cling to life through it when the angel of death stalks us. We sing it as we long to live in the mercy of the Lord. It is lovingly crafted for all of our most uncertain moments, it is so deeply woven into our present uncertainty that only a loving God who cares for us could have inspired it.

The point of Psalm 23 is to, quite bluntly, transform our longing for security into a lush landscape of secure peace, safety, and strength. How does it do this? Let’s talk about that…

Gerald Kennedy wrote (SLIDE), “It is strange and wonderful that the things a man believes in most are the very things he cannot prove or even express clearly”. The things we can ultimately and expertly explain mean very little to us precisely because we have explored that topic to its death. It no longer holds much value because the intrigue is gone and while we can prove the topic, it no longer thrills us. And thus, the important things of life are private. We can feel them, but we cannot prove them and having that kind of faith in something that has mystery to it excites us.

For us Christians, what happens to us after we die holds this exact feeling. Immortality for the Believer thrills our faith because it defies everything we know, and yet we can only touch the edges of it with our feelings, thoughts, and science.

Every Christian, young or old, terminally ill or healthy, asks themselves about immortality - about what happens when we die… and our answer to the question deeply affects our faith and our outlook in this life. No person who lives seriously can escape saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the age old question that Job asks (SLIDE) : If a man die, shall he live again? (Job 14:14)

Those who wrote the Second Testament made a HUGE deal about the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the resurrection is arguably the central theme of the Second Testament. The Gospels, the letters to churches, the epistles, all rest their arguments on the fact that Jesus was resurrected.

Without the resurrection, none of the writers have a foundation for their work. Modern critics have wondered why the writers didn’t tell us more about Jesus’ life; why talk so much about Jesus’ final days, crucifixion, and his escape from the tomb?

The answer is that our forefathers in the faith knew it was the resurrection of the Lord that gave His life its meaning. These people were writing about an event which convinced them ABSOLUTELY that death had been conquered - and that because Christ lived, they too would live.

Paul would also experience the Lord in a unique way, as would many who saw Jesus after His death and resurrection, coming all the way down to us here in 2024. I have heard the Good Shepherd’s voice in my life. I have experienced miracles. I have felt healing. I believe because I have EXPERIENCED Christ in my life… as have many of you and millions of Christians the world over.

But it is not an experience we can package up and pass along, it is not something we can make into a pill to be swallowed… these experiences convinced me and others but we can only touch the edges of them, we cannot definitively prove anything by them. If a person would know, they must join the fellowship of Christ and accept Him as king. Paul could not deny after knowing. I could not deny after knowing.

And yet no single person, believer or not, can deny that life after death is wrapped in mystery. Our age, steeped in science and practicality as it is, believes that the final test of an idea is whether it works or not. And so, I challenge us here today and to anyone watching whether a Believer or not to consider the following…

(SLIDE) When someone believes in immortality, do they not know a peace that the world cannot take away? Notice about the people who live for today MUST have their profit immediately, right now for they fear they’ll never get it.

These people are often irritable and worried. They search for some high, some assuring drug to bring them peace but they never end up finding it - deep down their soul is terrified because it knows how short this life is and yet has no faith in a future life.

Francis L. Patton of the Princeton Seminary once pointed out that the high point of the First Testament’s faith in immortality lies in this verse from Psalm 23 and I want you to say it with me (SLIDE): **Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me**. (Repeat if needed)

For the Psalmist, their belief in immortality comes from God’s Word alone. But for Paul, for those in the Second Testament, they are convinced by Jesus. Paul wrestles with a duty to stay here and a desire to go and share another life with Jesus in Philemon 1:23-24, he writes…

“**I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body**”. Paul is saying that he is willing to stay here on earth… to do the good things, to advance the faith, to advocate for Christ… but he wants to go and live with Christ forever.

If we are to believe in immortality, if we are to be convinced of another life after this, of a secure peace and safety then we need a shepherd to bring us to it… for we do not enter nor leave this world without the help of SomeOne beyond us. Life and death are not so haphazard and careless.

Psalm 23 speaks to us of immortality, but reminds us of the Good Shepherd in moments where we ask about our future’s certainty. It is one of the most beloved texts of Scripture, the most iconic, because we are so often swayed into anxiety.

We lose a job, our car breaks down, we are living pay cheque to pay cheque, we are diagnosed with illness, we run into an endless stream of bad luck situations… all of this serves to sway us from our certainty in Christ, rob us of our joy, and defile our faith.

Even the most faithful, Psalm 23 tells us in verses 3-5, experience this uncertainty. We all fall short, we all lose faith, we all doubt. But there is hope yet… there is a Shepherd who is good and pure, righteous and loving. He comes with a rod and a staff - standard for shepherding, and these things tell us He knows what is best.

The rod, long and thin, used to reach into the middle of the flock and instruct the sheep to move in a direction or to lay down. The staff supports the flock through discipline, and bringing comfort through directing the flock where it desires to go - which is towards the good and safe pastures.

The Psalm, God’s Holy and Sure Word concludes with these reassuring words about our future… “**Surely goodness and love with follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever**”.

Our Good Shepherd guides us into this immortal place, these green pastures of love. Remember that Christ, God’s only Son, came to us in the love of God. And His precious blood was shed so that our sins would be forgiven. Goodness and love follow each of you, every day, because you have called Jesus your Saviour.

I want to leave you with this for today… In the minutes of the 1791 Methodist Conference report on ministers for that year there was a section about who had died that year. Next to Wyatt Andrews, the report read as follows: (SLIDE)

“Wyatt Andrews - who died full of faith and the Holy Ghost. As long as he could ride, he travelled, and while he had breath he praised God”.

I wasn’t around then, this one sentence is all I know of Wyatt Andrews but no single person could want a finer epitaph. Let a person travel as long as they can ride. Let that person praise God as long as they draw breath. Then, let them die full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Against such a life like that, no power can stand, even death will give way before it.

AMEN.