

April 29, 2007/Fourth Sunday of Easter/David L. Edwards

Psalm 23      *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

Revelation 7:13-17      *"...for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

I have been reading a wonderful book by Rabbi Michael Lerner, entitled *THE LEFT HAND OF GOD: HEALING AMERICA'S POLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL CRISIS*. Some of you may already know this book. Lerner criticizes those on the political and religious Left for not acknowledging and responding to the spiritual dimension of people's lives. The Religious Right has taken this seriously, and though we do not agree with the perspective they offer, they are able to touch people's spiritual hunger. Lerner offers a positive and rich biblical and theological framework for those who want to see a nation and world marked by compassion, justice, and peace rather than selfishness, injustice, and violence.

Lerner says that in Jewish and Christian tradition, there is the Right Hand of God and there is the Left Hand of God. The Right Hand of God is associated with the God we see in portions of scripture that portray God's wrath, vengeance, and righteousness. The Left Hand of God is just as present in scripture, if not predominant, and has to do with God's loving kindness, compassion, desire for justice, and peace.

I think it is very helpful for those who are troubled by what we see as a somewhat schizophrenic portrait of God in scripture. The Right Hand of God, the God of anger, revenge, and punishment, is of no interest to a great many people. They have had enough of religion that fills them with guilt, fear, and no motivation to be better persons except the fear of being punished. The Left Hand of God, the God known essentially as love, as compassion, resonates with our desire to give to life instead of destroying life around us.

Psalm 23 is a shining example of the Left Hand of God. God is imaged as a caring shepherd, guiding, protecting, knowing the sheep, shielding them from threat. I think this is why Psalm 23 is known by heart by so many people. It is lovely poetry, expressing sublime spiritual insight and comfort. But it also expresses the very heart and essence of who God is.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Or we could translate it: "God is my shepherd, therefore I have everything I need." Would it surprise you if I said this is one of the most radical statements in the whole Bible? I think it is. It expresses utter and complete contentment rooted in our unshakeable relationship with God. We may want or need many things in life. But when it gets down to it, what we most need is awareness that our lives have meaning, that we are connected to life in an unshakeable and positive way. Having this kind of contentment that goes to the depths of our souls

means that nothing can fool us. Nothing can lure us into endless cycles of dissatisfaction and the seeking of fulfillment in things or people or anything else. Our society and world count on our restlessness and discontent. That's the only way we can be talked into buying all that stuff, or supporting unjust policies and systems, or falling into any other trap that promises fulfillment in some way.

When we practice "God is my shepherd, I have everything I need," we are learning to be at peace, to be aware of our discontent or restlessness or tendencies toward addictions of all sorts without either condemning ourselves or attaching to them. We grow in self-awareness and self-understanding. We become less attached to people's approval or acceptance. We are freed from the seeking of success or achievement or anything else others tell us are the measures of our worth. As we practice this contentment rooted in our relationship with God who loves us unconditionally, we see life more clearly and act more lovingly, without possessiveness, fear, or violence.

"God leads me beside waters of rest; God restores my life." This has also been translated, "God leads me beside still waters; God restores my soul." I think this means rest and refreshment in every dimension of our lives—physical, mental, spiritual. It is much like the words of Psalm 46—"Be still, and know that I am God." Stop struggling. Stop fighting within yourself or with others. Practicing the contentment rooted in our relationship with God leads naturally to these green pastures, these waters of rest, the restoration of our lives. I don't think we serve God's loving purposes very well when we are harried, feeling under pressure, running around exhausted, or generally feeling drained. This is why we have worked to bring into being the Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center here. In order to better serve God who calls us to the service of life, we need places and times for the rest that God wants to give us. With rest comes the clarity to know who we are and what we have to give to the world.

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil." It can be translated "the valley of the shadow of death," but there are other experiences in life besides death that make us fearful. The psalm is not saying that there is no evil, that there are no fearful experiences. But we can live without being overcome or controlled by our fears. This, too, is connected to our relationship with God and the contentment and restfulness that come with it. It is the awareness of being deeply cared for even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Michael Lerner writes: "In Judaism, sin is overcome through repentance, a return (*teshuvah*) to the divine image in which we were created. In Christianity, sin is overcome through faith in the person of Jesus...whose mission on earth was to enable human beings to once again find that divine good and hence repair the evils around them. In both traditions, we are told that evil can be overcome and that we need not live in fear." (p. 83) Today our society and world are soaked in fear. Many political, religious, military, and

corporate leaders count on our being fearful. When we are afraid, we are easy prey for those who would turn us in selfish, unjust, and violent directions. Here again is the radical nature of this sublime psalm. If we are deeply, spiritually content, able to live without fear, trusting in our created goodness and that of others and the world, we cannot be easily manipulated by those who perpetuate and profit from selfishness and violence.

There is much more in this psalm. I won't go through all of it. Perhaps this is enough to open up Psalm 23 in a fresh way for us, to see it as an expression of the Left Hand of God and of how we can live in awareness of our relationship with God who loves, cares for, and guides us now and forever.

I want to say a bit about the reading from the Revelation to John. What an extraordinary book it is, and how badly it has been used by those who want to play upon our fears. When read carefully and rightly, the Revelation is as hopeful and encouraging a book as we will find in the Bible. In vivid poetic images, the book speaks of hope for those who are giving their lives to the way that Jesus embodied and taught, who are working with our lives to respond to the call of God in Christ. It was written to Christians in the late first century facing extreme persecution in a human world filled with violence. It is not a prediction of events but a resounding statement that God's dominion over life is never threatened even when it seems that way. Life always comes through and the forces of violence and destruction have no real future.

In the portion for today, John is addressed by one of the elders. He is shown a multitude of people in white robes. "Who are these people robed in white, and where have they come from?" John replies that he has no idea but that his questioner must know. "These people have come through the great persecution (by Nero in John's time); they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white again."

Now I know that many of us modern-day folks are put off by those blood images. The idea that Jesus' death was a sacrifice to please God raises the problematic notion of a God who demands the death of his own son. I don't think that is the real meaning. The Hebrew understanding is that our blood is our life, which belongs to God alone. When Cain kills Abel, he takes God's place. That is why God puts a protective mark even on Cain so that no other human being will then take Cain's life. Even the life of Cain the murderer belongs to God alone.

Our blood, our life belongs to God alone, not to each other, not to any other human being or system. So when we speak of Jesus' blood being shed, it means that Jesus lived as one who knew his life belonged to God. He lived his life completely as an offering to God. Living our lives out of our relationship with God, which is what Psalm 23 is really about, is the only fulfilling way to live these brief, precious, and unique lives God has given us. But it is not easy. And that's where the robes washed white in blood come in.

The people John sees have suffered because they have lived out of their faith in Christ and in God. They have lived as those who know the Left

Hand of God, who have struggled with themselves and life in order to be compassionate, loving, just and peaceful. Yes, there are multitudes of them! We aren't alone in our struggles, in the difficulties we face when we commit ourselves to a journey of faith in God alone, following Jesus' life and teachings and spirit. What comfort there is in this picture! What encouragement to keep it up!

Last Monday, P.G. Cosby, Susan Rice and I drove to D.C. to see some of the work of the Church of the Saviour and to meet with Gordon Cosby and Kayla McClurg for lunch at the Potter's House. As we sat down to eat, more folks joined us who are involved in one ministry or another. Conversations in that crowd quickly get real and pointed about God who calls us to commit our lives completely to serving life around us, using our gifts, embracing our woundedness, growing in self-understanding. Gordon put it something like this: We all have the same problem, every one of us--What is the Founder of the Universe calling me to do with my life? Asking that question opens up a whole world of struggle as well as deep contentment and peace. It is the struggle of being who God made us to be, not what others want us or tell us to be. It is the struggle of awareness of our wounds and life-diminishing habits, and the struggle to take responsibility for ourselves and our own relationship with God our Shepherd. It is the peace, the contentment, the joy of living in and out of the Love that called us and the world into being.

As we work with our lives to live out of the shepherding love of God, we can be aware that there are many others everywhere trying to live out of the same contentment, the same compassion, the same desire to be people the way God made us to be. This is what it means to wash our robes, making them white in the blood of the Lamb. On this journey of faith, in life and in death, the Lamb at the center of the throne continues to be our shepherd, guiding us to springs of the water of life, and along the way and at the end, God will continue to wipe away every tear from our eyes.