

VESPERS HOMILY

15 OCTOBER 2017

LUKE 17: 11 – 19

PPSALM 23

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I seem to remember that quite early in Sunday School at the First Methodist Church of Irving Park in Chicago, we were supposed to memorize some passages from the Bible. The specific passages were the Ten Commandments and this Psalm, the 23rd Psalm. Of course we memorized them according to the wording in The King James Bible. Apparently that is still the common usage; I have noticed that, particularly at funerals, no matter what I say the congregation uses the King James translation.

So here we are having read that passage again. What image comes to mind?

Was the psalmist speaking of Jesus? If all those Good Shepherds on the Sunday School flannel board were correct, the ones we looked at while we memorized this Psalm, it must be so, but of course this Psalm was written centuries before The Incarnation. Nobody told us that.

This not a Davidic Psalm. It was probably written after the exile of the Jews in Babylon when they have returned to their land; both they and the land itself were profoundly changed.

There was no Temple in Jerusalem; the center of their religion was gone. Their faith was centered on the Torah and prayer, centered on the local village Synagogues. In place of priests there were Rabbis, teachers of Torah; in place of sacrifice there was prayer which made their religion very personal and immediate. There was an individual relationship to God. There were no intercessors imposing sacrificial rituals between the people and JHWH.

What must it have been like to leave Babylon and return to a homeland that was fondly remembered, a homeland that had slipped into legend as the older generation, a generation that had been taken away in exile, died away? For the younger people, the next generation it was a strange, perhaps alien land occupied over time by strangers with different memories and different customs.

Perhaps we should read this 23rd Psalm as though it were written by one of that new generation. What will guide him on the way to Israel; who will welcome him once he is there? His trust and faith is in his God.

He writes of his God as both a guide to the land and as a host on his arrival.

First he writes of God as a shepherd, a protector and guide. God will lead him to “green pastures,” at the end of his journey crossing the dry, arid, treeless desert, and “still waters.” Actually, in Hebrew it is “waters of rest” in his exhaustion after his great journey. He trusts that God will lead him in “paths of righteousness. Again, in Hebrew it is “the right path” across the desert to Israel.

He trusts the shepherd to lead and protect him in the “valley of the shadow of death” or “deep darkness.” God will guard him from evil, driving away with His rod and staff all that would interfere with him.

Then the writer speaks of the God who will welcome him to the land of his people, his home. God will greet him with a celebration, fine food and good wine after the hunger and thirst of his journey, and will anoint his sunburned head with cooling, soothing oil. A custom in the Middle East even today

Finally, in the Hebrew, the psalmist writes “Only goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall return to dwell in the house of the Lord, the length of my life.”

IN HIS HOLY NAME.