

PLACES IN THE HEART



May 4, 2020
Easter IV
Psalm 23
Rev. Dr. Robert T. Carlson

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing else I need.

He lets me rest in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. He causes me to come back, to repent.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will 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 will dwell in the house of the LORD for the length of days.

Thanks be to God for His holy Word, which is given unto us.

Doc Holliday was one of the infamous characters of the Old West. He was a duelist, a gunfighter, a gambler and a dentist. He was classically educated in his home state of Georgia, and then he contracted tuberculosis around age 20; or as the disease was more commonly known in the 19th century, consumption. His doctors told him to go west for the

dry air, so he set up a practice in Dallas for a time. But knowing his time on this earth was short, Doc Holliday followed his passion, which was gaming, gambling, a life lived on the edge.

This life led him to places like Dodge City, Kansas, and Tombstone, Arizona, where he had a date with destiny outside a place called the O.K. Corral. What I am interested in today, are his last words. At 36 years old, Doc Holliday's body was losing its fight with tuberculosis. He spent his last months in a Convalescent Hotel in Colorado, and according to legend, Doc looked down at the end of his bed at his bare feet, and said, "Hmm. No boots." Doc Holliday was sure that between gunfights and bar brawls, he would die with his boots on.

Me too. I always thought my last Sunday would involve preaching to the congregation in this sanctuary, but hmm... no boots. Nobody in the pews. Just me and this camera.

Emily Dickinson said it more poetically: "This world is not a conclusion." This life she says is a species beyond, as invisible as music, as baffling as philosophy, an unsolvable riddle for the wise, a puzzle to the scholar. To gain the world men and women have been willing to bear the contempt of generations even crucifixion. Faith slips, and laughs, rallies and blushes, plucks at a twig of evidence, asks in vain, the way. Preachers gesture wildly and choirs sing alleluias, and still, the heart of this life and this world nibbles at the human soul.

Today, I have one last sermon to try to make sense of this world and this life in the context of this congregation's common life. I'm not going to do that in twenty minutes, and I haven't completely been able to accomplish that in 24 years as your pastor. All I can do this morning is pluck at a twig of evidence, and let my faith laugh, and slip, rally and blush through the 23rd Psalm; this ancient song from which almost everyone remembers at least a line or two. Let it into your life and world, and this song will nibble at your soul for all your days.

King David is one of those complex Biblical characters who was at once a poet and an Old Testament gunslinger. He too, tried to make sense of this life and this world and his place in it. Facing a foe—the Philistine Goliath—an enemy whom no one thought could be defeated—David walked into the Valley of Elah with 5 smooth stones, a shepherd's crude sling, and the invisible music of faith.

"The Lord is my Shepherd. There is nothing else I need." When the people of Israel sought to understand what it meant to be the people of God, they fell on this image. Other psalmists and prophets confirmed that image: "Our God led his people like sheep and guided them through every wilderness like a flock." "We, your people, the sheep of Your pasture, will give thanks to You forever." "The Lord will tend his flock like a shepherd, will gather lambs in his arms, and gently lead those who are with young." Sheep have no natural defense. They don't have sharp teeth, nor powerful legs to kick with, or the speed to run away. They depend entirely upon a shepherd. For three thousand years, people traveling across the Negev between Egypt and Syria, pray this psalm, admitting there is no

police force here, no military security, no person to protect me, no weapon that will hold off every foe. All I have is God. The Lord is my shepherd.

As a young minister, I walked into a hospital room of a man dying from lung cancer. His family surrounded him, full of grief. This was a man who had been a powerful and respected lawyer in his life, a formidable father, an authority figure everywhere he went. He called me over and whispered, because that was all the voice he had left: “Say the 23rd Psalm with me.”

That request filled me with fear. I’m not sure I could have remembered my middle name at that moment. I cursed myself for not carrying my prayer book. I cursed my seminary professors for not preparing me for this moment. And then I calmed myself and started to remember. I remembered enough to start: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. I remembered the part about green pastures and still waters and then, oh yes, walking through the valley of the shadow of death, which is what we were doing right now. Slowly, haltingly—stumbling, slipping, rallying and blushing we made it through. Sometimes, he followed my lead and sometimes, I followed his. I choked on the words at the end—“goodness and mercy will follow me all my days.” What I learned in that moment is that everything in this life adds up to the same end: we are in God’s hands. And grace belongs to those people who know this and affirm this even with their dying breath. The Lord... the Lord is my shepherd.

“He lets me rest in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters. When I am lost, he calls me back and restores my soul.” I have been blessed throughout my ministry to have worked in places and among people who fed me, spiritually, intellectually—people who ministered to me even as I was ministering to them. I started leading Thursday morning Bible Studies in 1987 and I carried it through in every congregation I served until 2017, when my cancer diagnosis forced me to cut back my teaching schedule. I learned so much from those conversations, from the insights of people in those study groups. Some were reading Scripture for the first time in their lives; others came to class with favorite passages underlined. It seemed to me more of the words in their Bibles were underlined than not. Here in Okemos, we had a young woman attend Bible Study and church with us for two years. She was a graduate student from the Republic of China who had never touched a Bible and had only heard the party line about churches in the United States—that they were for the dying. She learned from us and we learned from her. The kind of give and take that happened in these Bible studies was a grace—a gift from God.

I am thankful that this congregation has listened carefully and patiently to my teaching and preaching and shared their own insights and observations which then in turn fueled more sermons and more teaching. I have always been convinced that preaching is an art that involves an on-going dialogue and relationship. My task as a preacher and pastor is to hear your stories and interpret them through the lens of Scripture and theology, and especially through the person of Jesus Christ.

I am grateful for mentors: Rev. Doyle Hansen in Des Moines, who saw something in me that I couldn't see, and he convinced me to go see what a Seminary education at Princeton might look like. He died 18 months later, a man in the middle of his life, and I'm sorry that I was not able to call on his guidance throughout my life and career.

In Santa Fe, Rev. Jim Brown and I would stand outside in the dark, in the courthouse parking lot that was behind the church. We would talk for an hour after Session meetings and I learned so much just listening to him. I'd get home late and my wife would say, "That was a long Session meeting," and I'd say, "not the Session meeting, the tutorial afterwards with Jim."

Rev. Gordon Stewart, from Cincinnati called me up one day in Santa Fe. He said, "I'm looking for an Associate Minister and I've asked a number of people for a recommendation and your name keeps coming up. If I can get to Santa Fe by noon tomorrow will you have lunch with me?" I told him that there were no commercial flights going from there to here, but sure, if he was in my office at noon, I'd go to lunch. He was there at 11:45. My family and I moved to Cincinnati and we were welcomed by that staff and congregation in so many wonderful ways. Gordon was so good to my kids and my wife, and he has always treated me like a brother.

But the green pastures and still waters in my life has always been my family. My brother and sister and their families were planning to come and surprise me this weekend, and then coronavirus surprised us all. One of my joys in the past few years is that the three of us have rediscovered our affection for one another and reconnected after many years of minimal contact. That reconnection has meant the world to me.

Barb's family has been a constant source of love and acceptance in my life. Her father, Ivan Mader, has long been a trusted counselor to me. Her sisters and brother embraced me into the family. The Corder family has shown me care, support, and love over the years.

I am thankful for my children and the relationship I have with all of them and their families now that they are adults with children of their own. When they were young, my children let me practice children's sermons on them. They forgave me when I was so often late picking them up after school, because someone at church needed just a quick word at the last minute. When they grew older, they listened to Sunday sermons, and never complained. My children and grandchildren, they are the ones who restore my soul, who call me back whenever I get lost in the stress of ministry.

My wife, Barbara, and I met when we were both students at Princeton Seminary. One of the things we shared in those early conversations was that both of us were very interested in religion, in Christianity, but not necessarily interested in working in the church. 40 years later, I can barely remember those conversations. There is a prayer in the marriage liturgy, and every time I pray it, I think of my wife: "Lord, Give them wisdom and devotion in their common life, so that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity,

a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy.” Barbara has been all those things for me and more, going on 42 years now.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” I have walked behind too many hearses, cast earth and ashes over every size of casket and urn, commended too many bodies and souls into God’s hands. We have walked through this valley together—you and I—holding and supporting one another through every kind and degree of grief. Out of the depths, we forged a bond, and that bond has shaped me into the person I am today.

I was in the church building—at work on September 11, 2001. Shortly after 12 noon, people started walking past my office and into the sanctuary to bow their heads and pray. A number of people were church members, others were just driving by on Okemos Road, saw a church, and though not practiced in prayer, they bowed their heads and bent their knees. Their faith slipped and blushed and rallied on that day. Every hour for the rest of the day, I stepped into the sanctuary, read scripture and said a prayer out loud with those who gathered.

And here we are again, in a time of national crisis, searching for the right words, searching for a deeper faith, and some sign of hope. “I will not fear, for you are with me.” David uses the Hebrew word, *emmadi* in this phrase. It is the same word that inspires Matthew to call the Messiah “emmanu’el,” God-is-with-us.

“He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. He anoints my head with oil. My cup overflows.”

When I was ordained in 1980, I was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church USA. That title still exists, but the denomination prefers to call its ministers Teaching Elders these days. But the sacramental work is such an important part of ministry. Baptizing children and adults in this sanctuary, welcoming new Christians into the life of faith is a source of joy that I will not forget. To make the sign of the cross on a forehead and offer a blessing: May God be in your head and in your understanding—that act has changed my life forever, and I hope yours as well. I thank you that I was able to baptize my nephew in this sanctuary and then to baptize all seven of my grandsons in this space.

One of the themes of my ministry has been to talk about opening doors to people. In word and in practice, I have tried to minimize the institutional barriers to participating in the life of the church, and emphasize opening doors to all sorts of people, all ages, ethnicities, races, genders. I believe that the most powerful place to communicate this acceptance is at the Lord’s Table.

Years ago, I told you all about a film called *Places in the Heart*. The film is set in east Texas during the depression. A young widow has to try to save the family farm, harvest the

cotton, raise her young children with the help of an African American farm worker and a blind boarder. Somehow, this unlikely group of people become family; and though they are beset by storm, prejudice, and violence, they survive and grow strong at the broken places of life.

It's the end of the film that has made a lasting impression on me. The camera shows a congregation at worship. It is a Presbyterian Church, you can tell, because people are passing plates of bread and small cups of wine to one another while sitting in the pews. Not a word is spoken. The camera just moves around showing all the people at worship. Soon, you notice there are African Americans in this congregation, and it jars your sensibilities. Were there integrated congregations in Texas in the 1930s? Then you see the brother-in-law sitting next to his estranged wife, and next to her is his mistress. They are smiling at one another as they pass the plates. There is no anger or bitterness evident on their faces. There is the African American foreman, and he is passing a plate to the men who beat him yesterday. Finally, you see the husband—the man who died in the first five minutes of the film—and he is sitting next to the man who murdered him. They too, pass the plate to each other politely. And now I see.

They broke bread and it was then that I recognize Christ in their midst. This is a vision of the Lord's Table prepared for us in God's kingdom. This is the meal Christ promised us, when all will be reconciled, and all will be welcomed, and all will take and eat and taste the goodness of the Lord. The good, the bad, the faithful, the unfaithful, the saints and the sinners are all sitting side by side and no one raises an eyebrow or says a discouraging word. The film ends when the murderer turns to the man he killed and says, "The peace of God be with you."

That is the image I will take with me as I leave this sanctuary this morning. I can look out at this empty sanctuary—and in my mind's eye, it is not empty. We may be separated from one another, all in our own homes, but we are still surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. I can call them back to mind, remember them sitting in this space, remember their smiles, their voices, their witness. I can look out and imagine all of you, see where you always sit. You are passing the plates of bread and wine, receiving the elements, sharing a word of peace with me and with one another. In my mind and spirit, I will call you by name, and offer you bread and cup in the Lord's name.

St. Augustine once said that on the day we are born, a physician could walk into the room and truthfully tell us: "I'm sorry. But this life is fatal. You won't get over this." Because life is finite and mortality the only thing that is sure in this life. That is true for my ministry here, with you: it is temporal, finite, and it comes to an end. But I won't get over this. I will carry you always in my heart.

"Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all of my days, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

It has been a privilege and an honor to walk with you as your pastor. Even as my life takes a new direction, I challenge you to walk like David, the shepherd boy who goes out to face down the enemy of God with little more than a sling and a prayer. Walk beside the good shepherd—the One who calls us by name, sets us down and feeds us, who calms the storms of life, who gathers us up into an army full of grace and peace, and sends us out to teach and heal and feed others, even when all around us is chaos, cruelty, and violence. The Lord is my shepherd. There truly is nothing else I need. Amen.