

**Sunday, May 8, 2022**  
**Psalm 23 / Acts 9:36-43**  
**"To Be Alive"**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

If you've been paying attention this morning, you know that we've had a pretty heavy dose of Psalm 23. We just heard it read, of course (thank you, Gerry), but we also heard it in the blessing as we breathed our way into worship. We heard it in our Call to Worship. And we heard it in our Community Prayer.

It shows up once or twice a year in the Lectionary cycle, and I have to say, after what has been kind of an intense week for me personally, and what has felt like a particularly intense week in the world around us, it comes right on time.

There's a reason the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is so familiar to so many. There's a reason it's often read at the bedsides of those who are sick or dying. There's a reason it's often read at funerals. It is profoundly comforting, reorienting us to God as Shepherd, the divine caregiver and constant companion who doesn't just OFFER us goodness and love, but PURSUES us with it.

It reminds us that God is the One who – in the midst of whatever dark valley or evil we may be experiencing in our own lives or witnessing in the world around us – invites us to slow down and to LIE DOWN amidst the beauty of creation and rest a while.

God is the One who continually leads us back to life. To our full, authentic selves. To vitality. To healing. To restoration. To presence. To stillness. To fullness. To abundance. To goodness. To ALIVE-ness.

God is the One who leads us back to a place at the table because there is ALWAYS room at God's table. God is the One who leads us back to overflowing cups when life, when the world, leaves us dry and dying of thirst.

I know we just heard it, but I invite you to hear it again.

*God, you are my shepherd, I shall not want. You make me lie down in green pastures; you lead me beside still waters; you restore my soul. You lead me in right paths for your*

*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.*

That, friends, is always right on time. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm will preach all by itself, but I want to turn our attention to the reading from Acts.

Within the extended season of Easter in which we now find ourselves, we skip ahead with this reading to the early Christian community.

The same disciple, Peter, the fisherman who stumbled his way through discipleship class and who predictably and repeatedly denied even knowing Jesus before his crucifixion, is cast into a leading role.

Hearing that he's in the area, Peter is summoned by his fellow disciples to Joppa, where another faithful disciple – Tabitha in Aramaic, Dorcas in Greek – became ill and has just died. She who was notably celebrated for her good works and acts of charity, and who, by the way, is celebrated as a saint in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Saint Tabitha.

Peter is invited to come AFTER her death, when her body is already washed and prepared for burial, presumably with the hope that he might bring her back to life.

He and the other disciples, empowered as they are by the Spirit of Pentecost, picking up where Jesus left off, had already performed many healing miracles – “signs and wonders” as they're described previously in Acts. In many ways, the stories themselves mimic the stories of Jesus' healing.

At one point, in Chapter 5, we're told that people “even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by.” And so be healed. And so they were.

But nothing like this.

You heard the story already, so you already know how it ends. Peter does indeed bring her back to life. It's a miracle. But I have to say, I find myself drawn not to the heavenly miracle of it, but to the earthy mechanics of it. Keeping Psalm 23 in mind.

Alone with Tabitha's dead body, with widows weeping outside, wearing the clothing Tabitha had made for them, Peter kneels down and prays. He **KNEELS DOWN AND PRAYS** – picture it, the very posture of humility and compassion, very much recalling and reflecting Jesus, who knelt down to wash his disciples' feet, including Peter's, before they shared a final meal together. Before the arrest and crucifixion Jesus knew was coming. An example for them to love as he loved.

And so with that same love, with that posture of humility and compassion, Peter turns to her and says, "Tabitha, get UP."

An utterly preposterous thing to say to a dead body, but hear in his words the calming voice of God, the Shepherd, the divine caregiver and constant companion, calling us to **LIE DOWN** in green pastures and beside still waters now calling Tabitha to **GET UP**. Calling forth life in the face of death. Calling her – even she who is dead – back to life.

Tabitha opens her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat UP. And then "(Peter) gave her his hand and helped her UP. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive." Gathering the saints who modeled care and compassion, and gathering the widows, who represent in biblical tradition those most vulnerable and in need of care and compassion, he shows Tabitha **TO BE ALIVE!**

Friends, please, please don't let yourselves get lost in the **OTHER-WORLDLY** miracle of the story, but see and hear the **THIS-WORLDLY** mechanics of caring presence and compassionate companionship. A simple act of divine love, expressed in both word and deed, that dares to bring life where there is only death. A simple act of divine love that lifts UP the possibility of life where life does not seem possible.

Even if Peter had not brought Tabitha back to life, even if there was no miracle to record, he still brought life and love by simply showing up. By kneeling and praying. That's why we can't get distracted by the miracle.

As Easter people, we are the ones called to channel divine presence in each other's lives and in the world around us.

In the midst of the darkest valleys and the most horrific evils, we are the ones called to invite each other to slow down and lie down amidst the beauty of creation and rest a while.

We are the ones called to continually lead each other back to life. To each other's full, authentic selves. To vitality. To healing. To restoration. To presence. To stillness. To fullness. To abundance. To goodness. To ALIVE-ness.

We are the ones called to make a place for each and every other at the table, because, WHAT?, there is ALWAYS room at God's table.

We are the ones called to use our words and extend our hands to help lift each other UP and lead each other BACK to overflowing cups when life, when the world, leaves us dry and dying of thirst.

We don't need miracles; we need each other! We need to lift each other UP in social, political, economic, religious and educational structures, in neighborhoods, in cities, states, countries, in a global community so consistently and painfully devoid of humility and compassion, so hell-bent on tearing each other DOWN;

so hell-bent on fear-mongering and scapegoating and victim-blaming;

so hell-bent on terrorizing people and destroying the earth in heartless pursuit of corporate-backed power and profit;

so hell-bent on denying and so perpetuating the racist legacy and ongoing impact of slavery and Jim Crow and white supremacist systems on the lives of Black and brown lives;

so hell-bent on celebrating toxic masculinity and enabling Christian nationalism;

so hell-bent on criminalizing families forced by violence and poverty to cross borders in search of a better life;

so hell-bent on stifling authenticity and boxing people in to narrow gender and sexual identities;

so hell-bent on diminishing democracy by suppressing voices and dismantling votes;

so hell-bent on legislating women's bodies and demonizing pregnant women.

As those called by the One who lifts all of us up, who enlivens and leads all of us into and back to life, again and again and again, the world desperately needs us, again and again and again, to channel that divine presence. To model the posture of humility and compassion. To pray. To slow the pace. To show the beauty. To make room at the table. To bring love and new life to the living dead among us, because we know that existing is not the same as living.

And surrounded by the saints and the widows, to show each other to be alive where death is all we see or notice.

*God, you are our shepherd, we shall not want. You make us lie down in green pastures; you lead us beside still waters; you restore our souls. You lead us in right paths for your name's sake. Even though we walk through the darkest valley, we fear no evil; for you are with us; your rod and your staff – they comfort us. You prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies; you anoint our heads with oil; our cups overflow. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the LORD our whole lives long.*

May it be so.