Lewistown-Trinity United Methodist Church

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Greetings in the name of the Lord on Ascension Sunday!

Our scriptures were from Acts 1:1-11 and the 23rd Psalm.

In first century B.C., much of the world was unexplored, unknown and uncharted. As a result, map-makers came up symbols for these regions such as dragons, monsters and large fish to send the clear message that these unknown territories were likely frightening and terrifying places. Terrors would be found; and yet, as many maps declared, ‘There may be Treasures’ as well. When we get into uncharted territory, we don’t always know how to navigate either.

In the first century B.C., ‘A commander of a battalion of Roman soldiers was caught up in a battle that took him into the territory that mapmakers had represented with their monsters and dragons. Not knowing whether to forge ahead into the unknown, or turn back into the known, which would result in a retreat, he dispatched a messenger to Rome with this urgent request: "Please send new orders. We have marched off the map.”

Well, for nearly three months, we have "marched off the map,” finding ourselves in uncharted territory. We have marched off the technology map, social media map, the economic map, the health care map and whatever other map you can think of. Though (this is an important word), though in unknown territory, though in the midst of a new virus, though in the uncertainties of life, the Lord our Shepherd.

David, the author of the 23rd Psalm, knew the truth behind that word "though." As a shepherd, he knew there were dangers lurking around every corner. It wasn’t "if" he would encounter dangers, he would. He knew life wasn't all green pastures, still waters, or tables overflowing with more than he’d need. Like us, he struggled. He had enemies – both himself and others - yet the Lord was his shepherd. The Good Shepherd cared for David, fed, protect-ed, and prepared a table for him, in much the same way he prepared a table for his sheep.

The best grazing pastures for sheep are found in the highlands of our Western United States and Southern Europe. These high plateaus are called ‘mesas’ (mei-suhz), the Spanish word for ‘table.’ Author Phillip Keller, of *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, shares how shepherds prepared the mesas, for their sheep.

“As the snow melts, the shepherd goes to the high country, keeping in mind the best use of the land during the summer season. He takes supplies of salt and minerals and distributes them strategically for the benefit of the sheep. He determines the best bedding grounds and decides which areas will be lightly or more heavily grazed. He checks for poisonous plants and avoids or eradicates them.”

Every spring, Keeler shared, he and his children would pull out a particular poisonous plant from their grazing areas, because if a lamb took a small nibble or two, it would be paralyzed and die. It was hard work for the good shepherds to carefully “prepare the table, the mesas, for the sheep.” - - Our Good Shepherd has also carefully prepared a table for us.

God’s preparation involved Jesus descending from heaven, being born as ‘God with Us’, growing up like we did, yet lived a life that transformed his fellow Jews. In his ministry, he endured the agony of knowing what was before him. He was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, beaten by the guards, presented to Pilate, nearly scourged to death, crucified, and died on the cross – all for us.

Every time we partake of Communion together, his table is prepared with bread, which represents Jesus’ body, and the fruit of the vine, which represents his blood shed for us. Jesus died so our sins could be washed away; a divine sacrifice, for the forgiveness of our sins.

Jesus demonstrated his true love and care for us. He laid down his life for us, his sheep. He prepared a mesa for us, filled with food, drink, rest, shelter, protection, and forgiveness. Our Good Shepherd does all of this, even in the presence of our enemies, and blesses us.

Sheep almost always eat in the presence of their enemies, and are able to do so safely, when cared for by a trustworthy shepherd. Their enemies are the predators: wolves, coyotes, cougars, and bears, depending where they’re located. These predators look for an opportunity to hunt and scatter the flock. Some they will eat portions of the kill, while others kill for sport. Those raising livestock know how destructive a coyote or fox is, when it attacks your animals. Predators are an enemy of sheep. However we have an enemy - Satan.

Satan attacks our heart, mind, soul, and spirit. He prowls around like a predator, finding ways to attack and devour us. Satan is our tormentor and accuser. He whispers in our ear saying we are not good enough, smart enough, or righteous enough for God or anyone else to love us. He convicts us of our sin, and keeps reminding us of past sins. He convinces us we don’t have time, the energy, nor are holy enough to come to church. He is a liar. The fear he places in us is a lie.

He also doubles down, making sure we have accusers who will demoralize and destroy us, whenever they have a chance. These enemies harass us, start rumors, and cause chaos in our life. Illness and disease are also an enemy as our body fights cancer, dementia, infections, unknown disorders, viruses, and more. Yet we can be our own worst enemy.

When Satan gets into our head, we suffer with self-hate from sins we committed long ago, even after we asked God to forgive us. We are our own worst enemy when we ‘beat’ ourselves up for our various short-comings and mistakes. The enemy within disrupts our sleep, keeps us from rest, as we worry over money, family, situations, and then stress out ourselves over all types of ‘what ifs’, and become even more anxious.

Composer and songwriter of “*If It Hadn’t Been for the Lord”* Margaret Douroux shares about the Good Shepherd she trusts and knows, with these words: “If it had not been for the Lord on my side, tell me where would I be. He kept my enemies away; he lit the sun shine through a cloudy day. He rocked me in the cradle of his arm when he knew I had been battered and scorned, so, if it had not been for the Lord on my side, tell me where would I be.

“He never left me all alone; he gave the peace and joy I’d never known. He answered when I knelt to really pray, and in victory the Lord brought me his way, so - If it had not been for the Lord on my side, tell me where would I be. If it had not been for the Lord on my side, tell me where would I be.” [# 2053 in FWS]

To get to the place of peace, assurance, and trust when we encounter adversity, begins with the conviction that God is with us, never forsakes us, and will always be our Shepherd. It’s about knowing, without doubt, that Jesus is always with us, especially in the midst of heartache and despair. It’s knowing the Holy Spirit works in our life, and on our behalf, filling our heart, mind, and soul, with his peace, grace, presence, and protection so we can make it through the storms of life, even just through another day. Being confident that God will bring about goodness in and through every situation, no matter how awful it may be, gives us an assurance that those without faith can never understand.

In the midst of our turbulent lives, in the midst of all our human flaws and uncharted territory, we know Jesus anoints our head with the oil, and our cup overflows. Through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, we are recipients of more than we could ever ask or imagine. God’s protective power is so great, the psalmist proclaims, ‘you set a table before me in the present of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. God attends to us, like a shepherd who puts oil on his sheep, so they can rest from various insects and parasites which tend to attack them. - -

We all have people who ‘bug’ us - and to get over, under, and around them, we need a daily anointing of God’s Spirit upon us. When we ask for God’s presence in a circumstance, we are better able to demonstrate the Fruit of the Spirit in any situation: our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, which all come from the Lord. With God by our side, our first instinct is no longer to react, but to respond to the irritants in our life. When we ask the Holy Spirit to pour out God’s gracious Spirit upon us, we respond to the aggravations and annoyances in our life with composure and grace, because we know God is fighting on our behalf.

Cory Asbury, in his song *Reckless Love,* sings, “When I was Your foe, still Your love fought for me; You have been so, so good to me; When I felt no worth, You paid it all for me; You have been so, so kind to me.”

“Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God  
Oh, it chases me down, fights 'til I'm found, leaves the ninety-nine  
I couldn't earn it, and I don't deserve it, still, You give Yourself away  
Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God.” If you listen to the radio recording of this song, he recites the 23rd Psalm, in a modern version, at the end. If you have a chance this week, I invite you to listen to this contemporary Christian song. <https://www.google.com/search?channel=cus2&client=firefox-b-1-d&q=reckless+love>

Dorothy Tatum, when she was director of Urban and Global Ministries wrote, “Christians do not doubt God’s powerfulness. When God leads us through quiet, wonderful places, he is also with us through the harsh realities of life, those sometimes dangerous places we walk. We are not alone. We have a “fierce protector who will fight on our behalf.

“When King David was a young shepherd,” she wrote, “he protected his sheep against attacks of wolves and lions, even pursing thieves to rescue the sheep. Our shepherd is even more powerful and protective. God’s power snatches us from the devastations of adversity. God fights on our behalf, for God is ready for the battles that confront us.”

Although Psalm 23 is most often repeated in the midst of death and dying, it is very much a Psalm for the living. God works, in mighty ways, in the unmapped and uncharted territory of our lives. God protects, feeds, and cares for us. God is in every part of our life. God will never leave you or forsake you! Praise God, for our cup will always overflow.

Have a blessed week!

Pastor Debbie