

Revelation 7:9-17      The Divine and the Human  
Psalm 23  
May 12, 2019

Once again there are three texts that have been read this morning.

In the Book of Acts, the story is told of a woman named Tabitha, a highly revered woman who went around doing good and taking care of the poor. When she died there was a sense of great loss. I am sure the reason this text appears in the lectionary on this day is because it is Mother's day.

Though the story does not mention Dorcas, as she was also known, as a mother, the community at Joppa viewed her as a remarkable human being. One might say she took care of them like a mother. Peter was summoned and interestingly, the widows showed him the clothing she had made, presumably for them, while she was still alive.

They were trying to tell Peter that she was precious to them. So Peter raised her up, which was a comfort to the people there, and many came to faith in Christ.

Psalm 23

The 23rd Psalm is also one of the readings for this day, and is very familiar, like the hymn, "Amazing Grace," is strong in its power to reach deep into the recesses of the human heart.

Even people who claim unbelief, or act like they don't believe, will stop and listen to its rhythm and poetry and its meaning, and want it read at memorial services. We always read it there, but sometimes must read it in this setting, regular worship, on Mother's Day, in the middle of the Easter season.

It tell us that life is a gift from God who takes care of our every need, one might say like a mother, and there are images that are associated with motherhood; making one lie down in green pastures like a child being tucked in at night, the preparing of a feast, the presence in difficulties, the discipline.

The psalm is simple, beautiful and honest. And because its message rings true across the ages we broaden it, by drawing out its universal message, its general truths about life.

Agriculture to Industry

The primary image comes from the realm of ancient agriculture, especially shepherding. And though we live in the industrialized world of mass suburbs and high-rise buildings, of mechanized transportation and hyper-communication, this pastoral scene still attracts us, calms us, inspires us. Even though we do not live each day in green pastures, we sometimes seek them out on vacations and retreats.

Either way, with all life's drastic changes that came along with the changing of the world from agriculture to industry, though they are many, some things remain

the same. We still live a life of contradictions, like in the psalm. Some of the time things are pretty good. Thank God for those times.

## The Apocalypse

Other times things are intolerable. One of the most believable claims in the psalm is that we have this feast in the presence of enemies, in the shadow of death's cloud. The genre of "Jewish Apocalyptic" literature came from people who lived in intolerable times, much worse than I have known in my lifetime.

It is from this genre that the last book in the Bible comes, "The Apocalypse of John," The Book of Revelation." There is no real need to go into much detail about why things were so bad. We have enough trouble in our own times to get the picture.

Those in power persecute those who resist. Those who "have" make enemies of those who "have not" and try to protect what they have against those who are trying to get more for themselves. It is an old, old story.

The leaders there in the province of Asia did not see their role as taking care of their subjects, but dominating them, keeping them in line. Those on the receiving end of oppression and persecution and injustice tend to complain about it and some the register their complaints with God.

The Book of Revelation is such a complaint, it was written by someone and for some people whose experience of the presence of enemies and the shadow of death was intense.

But like the psalm, we broaden the message so that we can see that it represents a general truth; that we are *all* vulnerable, even the powerful among us; that all of us always lived in the presence of enemies and in the shadow of death, and not merely the weak and powerless.

In the Christian apocalyptic view, the answer to the complaint is, "wait." Waiting is required because indeed there is a reckoning on the way, and on that day justice will be served, and wrong will be made right, and truth will be made known.

Yet we are expected to wait through the hard times. Let us be reminded on this Mother's Day in the season of Easter that God has met our needs and taken care of us, that forgiveness and reconciliation is also a gift and that imbedded in the grand scheme of things is the victory of goodness and mercy.

It is in mercy God is extending the deadline for all of us to change our hearts and mend our ways, and once again we sense the way in which moms are known for never giving up on their children, always seeing the human being underneath the misbehavior, underneath the pain, being eternally patient, always ready to forgive.

## The Promise

But the call for patience in the middle of intolerable suffering is not the only reason the apocalyptic vision caught on. It is because there is in it a great promise that takes hold of the human spirit and won't let go.

The text from the 7th Chapter of John's apocalypse states it nicely. Those whose robes are white have come out of the Great Tribulation. Therefore,

“They are before the throne of God, and serve God day and night in his temple; and the one who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.

For the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

And what else do moms do but wipe away the tears. And so I understand that these three texts were not coincidental on this day. They speak to us of God as not just a father, but also as a mother, tenderly taking care of her children.

And that is, of course, the meaning of Easter. And let this be the image we take home today, as we reflect upon these motherly ideas about God. We let this image take hold of our spirits and refuse to let go; that

like a mother who sees the human being in the child, God sees us in our humanity and has chosen not only to forgive but to indwell, so that we can begin to see others that way.

Easter means that we take a look at the people around us the way we have learned that God sees us, sees them, and keep looking until we see them human (I am very bad at this and preaching mainly to myself), and keep seeing them human until, at long last, we see the presence of the divine within, which makes them precious, makes all of us precious.

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