

Acts 9:36-43 Gazelles and Green Pastures
Psalm 223
May 10, 2022

One of the distractions I permitted myself while in St. Louis a few weeks ago, was to go for a walk at the St. Louis Zoo. Unlike other zoo's, the one in St. Louis is municipal, that is, largely underwritten by public funds. There is no entrance fee. Do not get me wrong, they have very thoughtfully invented all kinds of ways to get your money while you are there, but entrance is actually free and if one is determined the entire experience can be without cost, except the time and the energy required.

And it is a beautiful zoo, by reputation one of the best in America, and the world. It has been one of life's delights have grown up there, and to have been able to visit dozens of time throughout my life. Things are always changing and it had been a while, so I went for a walk there one afternoon. Several of the features are the same; there is still a train and a merry-go-round (one has to buy tickets for them, but even if one does not indulge, they are part of the experience).

There are polar bears, lions and tigers, giraffes and elephants and zebras, snakes and reptiles, birds and several kinds of livestock, including a Missouri Mule (I always felt sorry for the mules, they could just as easily be on a farm somewhere nearby). There are hyenas, and a hippopotamus and rhinoceros, as well as many exotic species of this and that, primates and the penguins and the puffins.

My favorites are the big cats, the tigers and the lions, and it never fails when you are there, that they are out and visible (sometime animals find hiding places in their habitats, which are built nowadays to resemble as much as possible their natural surroundings. And there are Gazelles, which are a delight to see because of the ease and gracefulness of their movements, effortlessly bounding their way across the terrain, making it difficult for any predator to catch them.

It is not surprising, then, to find out that the Gazelle has become the inspiration for a female name, in some languages anyway. It refers to a gracious woman who is kind, and generous towards those less fortunate than she is, although I suspect that the original inspiration had more to do simply with outer beauty. It was the bible story that changed the meaning from outer to inner gracefulness.

The Greek name is, "Dorcas," and in Aramaic, it is "Tabitha," which has become a somewhat common name for girls; a character on the old TV situation comedy, "Bewitched," and olympic curler and everything from diplomats to actresses, have shared that name.

The biblical person was a woman who lived in a place called Lydda, near Joppa, on the Eastern Mediterranean coast. She was known for doing good and helping the poor. When she became ill and died, she was mourned and greatly missed.

In the gospel stories, it would be Jesus who came to the rescue in a situation like this one; as in the case of Lazarus, or the daughter of Jairus, or the son of the unnamed woman at the place called Nain. Everyone dies, and one presumes that these people also did, but a few times, in the spirit of Easter and to bear witness to the resurrection, Jesus compassionately raised a few people so that their friends might be encouraged towards that great hope.

But Jesus was no longer around, so it was up to Peter to step in and act in the place of Jesus, and in Jesus' name. And that is what Peter did. The raising of Tabitha could be seen as a demonstration of God's power, the power of life to conquer death.

But it could also be felt by those closest to it, the too-good-to-be-true news that Tabitha was alive and healthy and able to continue awhile longer in her precious service, bounding her way effortlessly through life living up to her name. It could be seen as the transfer of the power to raise the dead from Jesus to the church.

I was reminded, for some reason, about the story of Cynthia Ann Parker, a name some of you may know, I may have mentioned her before. She was from Texas in the 19th century and was kidnapped in a raid by one of the indigenous tribes on the southern plains and lived for 25 years or so among them.

Famously, after several years she was given the chance to return to her Texas family and refused.

Among the reasons she gave was that she knew couldn't bring her children with her and wanted to stay with them. Years later, in a raid by Texas Rangers on the village in which she lived, she was recaptured and, against her will, returned to her relatives in Texas.

There was a little girl with her, and I think it was the little girl's name that made me think of her. They had also taken the name from nature, they called her Prairie Flower. What a beautiful name? Each time the flowers bloom, it is nature's witness to resurrection.

I also find it interesting that the reading from the psalter for today is the 23rd Psalm, because it also takes images from nature, green pastures and still waters. The scriptures we read together shape the tenor of our worship, as do the stories we tell and the illustrations we give.

And the world events, where history has gone in the last 2,000 years; the wars, the changes in political organization and technology, that shape the way people live and organize their relationships with each other, and all the personal histories along the way; unimaginable catastrophes lived out alongside miraculous wonders. People, bounding their way through time leading into eternity.

So I can't resist reading the 23rd Psalm aloud here at the end of this week's worship, but let us read it together as a prayer; in memory of the woman named Gazelle that Peter raised in the name of Jesus, and the other women that have graced our lives, and of the

little girl they named after the prairie flowers, in the hope that in these troubled times, we might also find the boundless energy of resurrection life.

KJV

23 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

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