

Psalm 23:2a - Mid-week Service Lent 2023 II

Pr. Kurt A. Van Fossan - בְּנֵאוֹת דֶּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצְנִי

"In pastures green He makes me lie down"

We continue our meditation on Psalm 23 with the first half of verse 2. בְּנֵאוֹת דֶּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצְנִי, *"In pastures green He makes me lie down."*

Verse 1 began in the present tense, *"The LORD is my shepherd,"* and ended with the future tense, *"I shall not want."* Then in verses 2-5 God switches the verbs (or action words) to the imperfect tense. If your knowledge of grammar is as sketchy as mine, you may need to be reminded that the imperfect tense can refer to the present and/or the future. So even though our text says, *"He makes me lie down in green pastures,"* it could also be translated *"He will make me lie down in green pastures."* Not only does God provide for my needs today, but He promises to provide for my needs in the eternal future as well. This is very comforting to know and gives us true peace.

It's hard to be happy today if we're worrying about what will happen tomorrow. What great peace there is in knowing, therefore, that the one who created and sustains all things—the one who loves us and has made us His child in Holy Baptism, "He makes and will make us lie down [rest] in green pastures," free from the worry of disaster or from being in need. This is possible because we, along with our future, are in our Savior's hands. We often emphasize this good news in the imperfect tense by saying in our liturgy, "As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever."

Right from the beginning, when God created mankind, He provided for all our needs. And even when man doubted and didn't trust God, God continued to provide for us by promising us a Savior to fix the mess man caused by his sin. So you see, God's provisions don't come only when we do good, but even when we sin! He's a God who gives good things, especially through our Savior, Jesus Christ, and He promises to continue to do so in the future, which in Christ lasts forever in paradise with Him! "As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever!" Such promises may be in the imperfect tense, but they certainly give us perfect peace!

In spite of this good news, our sinful natures are uncomfortable with the word *"makes me"* or *"will make me lie down."* Our sinful nature doesn't like to be told what to do, even it's good for us. We like to choose for ourselves when to work and when to lie down or rest. Unfortunately, without God first leading us to green pastures and then making us lie down—making us rest in those green pastures, we would run around in this wilderness looking for peace and fulfillment in all the wrong places, until we would eventually collapse in complete exhaustion or total despair.

So how does God make us foolish sinners lie down before we kill ourselves? By humbling us, and giving us faith through His Law and Gospel. First He tells us ahead of time that, because of our sinful nature, we by ourselves will never be able to find or rest in green pastures. Even though this is bad news, it's good to know since it's the truth which we by ourselves would be forever looking for and never finding.

But then God gives us good news too, letting us know that He still loves us despite our sins and has, therefore, provided for our eternal rest in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus death in payment for our sins He takes away our fear of His future judgement against our sins (which is death). And then, after rising to life again, He promises to continue to be with us as our Savior to provide for all our needs.

Natural man doesn't even know that death is a result of his sins. He just figures that it's the natural way of things. It **is** the natural way of this fallen world, but it's certainly **not** the way God intended it to be.

Another thing natural man isn't aware of is the fact that death isn't the end of his suffering, but would only be the beginning of the worst of his eternal suffering in hell. And, again, even though knowing that is even more terrifying than perhaps the thought of simply ceasing to exist after death, it's the truth and, therefore, better to know than not to know. Through the truth of God's Law (which condemns us as sinners), along with the truth of the Gospel (which saves us sinners), God enables us to repent of our endless/futile efforts of trying to find peace on our terms. Instead, He enables us to trust in Him and His promise of peace through Jesus Christ.

So where are those peaceful "*green pastures*" that God talks about in this Psalm; the place where He fulfills our greatest need to not only know and believe in our need for a Savior, but also that Jesus Christ is that Savior. The "*green pastures*" are where God's Word and Sacraments are correctly taught, since this is where God promises to be to create and sustain our faith—to fill our spiritual stomachs so to speak, and give us rest at the same time. In Luther's Large Catechism under the section on the Lord's Supper, he says: "The Sacrament is given as a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself so that it will not fall back in such a battle..."

The battle he's referring to is the battle between our vicious sinful nature and our God given faith—the battle which begins in us at the time of our Baptism. The Lord's Supper refreshes and strengthens our faith so that it will not fall backward in such a battle, "but become stronger and stronger. The new life must be guided so that it continually increases and progresses. But it must suffer much opposition..." (24-26a).

That opposition often comes from within, and in subtle ways. For example, when providing for our physical needs causes us to think we have no need for the "*green pastures*" of God's Word and Sacraments. That's when physical blessings can become a spiritual curse. Of course, our sinful nature loves doing the same with our times of suffering, causing us to turn away from God. So, when it comes to our daily bread, we leave it up to the Lord, who knows how much or how little to give us.

For now, we thank God for making us "*lie down*" in the "*green pastures*" of His Word and Sacraments, where He creates saving faith in us and continues to work to strengthen our faith so that we can say with Job, "*The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD*" (Job 1:21), or with St. Paul, "*He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?*"—all the things we need for our eternal salvation.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.