

Psalm 23:2b-3a - Mid-week Service Lent 2023 - III

עַל-מֵי מַגְחָחוֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי - *“By waters still He leads me,*

יְשׁוּבֵי נַפְשִׁי יִשְׁכַּב - *He restores my soul.”*

This evening we continue on from last week’s “*green pastures,*” where God made it possible for us to lie down with a full stomach, at peace and satisfied with faith in the knowledge of all that our LORD has done for us in the past and continues to do today. He came as our Good Shepherd to provide the way through the wilderness—through a life without God—and back to the eternal “*green pastures*”—to the Garden of Eden. His damning death and resurrection assures us that He knows the way through this valley of the shadow of death and back to those eternally green pastures.

Remember what I said last week about the Imperfect tense of the verbs in this part of Psalm 23. As Jesus has provided the way through His death and resurrection in the past, so also does He assures us that this way is open to us today, and will continue to be open to us throughout our future days. “As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.” The only thing that can close the way to the eternal green pastures of paradise, opened for us by Jesus Christ, is our rejection of Jesus Christ and His work as our Savior.

So the next part of Psalm 23 reinforces God’s promise of salvation in order to strengthen our faith so that we would not reject Him. “*By waters still He* (Almighty God/יְהוָה in Jesus Christ), *leads me.*” “*Still waters*” is a good translation of the Hebrew word here. It suggests a place of rest where our needs of life, such as the water of eternal life which Jesus spoke of in our Gospel reading, are provided, now and forever.

None of the things we labor for in this world can deliver us from death. Knowing this (in the back of our minds) is no doubt one of the reasons our lives in this world can be so frustrating and turbulent. All our best efforts amount to nothing when it comes to our eternal salvation. Only our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through His work on the cross—His death in payment for our sins, and His resurrection victory over our sins, death and all the forces of evil, can give us true peace and everlasting rest.

And the Lord gives us all the benefits of His death and resurrection, quenching our thirst for eternal life (John 4:14), not only through the message of the Gospel, but also through the still, refreshing waters of Holy Baptism. That’s why I chose the picture on the back of your bulletin. It shows the cross of Christ dripping all it’s benefits into the waters of our Baptism.

As we heard in our Epistle reading from Titus 3, our salvation is not the result of “*works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.*” The “*still waters*” of Holy Baptism are a gift from God which He continues to unwrap for us throughout our lives by assuring us, through His Word, of His love and power to do all that is necessary to save us.

Even though Paul in our Epistle reading, and elsewhere, urges us as Christians to perform good works, such good works are not done to try to repay God or to add to all that He has done and continues to do to give us peace. Instead, our good works are the ongoing work of God in us for the good of others—fruits of our faith which are meant to lead **others** to the saving “*still waters*” of Holy Baptism.

Of course our tendency, at times, is to continue to worry and become frustrated and turbulent inside and out (especially when we focus on the troubled waters in the world around us). This reminds us of our sinful nature, and that we are not yet in our heavenly home. When those turbulent times come, God leads us back to His Word, and the promises He made to us through the “*still waters*” of our baptism, when He clothed us in the death and resurrection of His Son. “*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*” (Galatians 3:27).

God assures us that our sins, which continue to try to drown us, have already done their worst by drowning our Savior Jesus Christ. But then He rose from death, never to die again, and assures us in His Word and Baptism that He will continue to do the same for us. Our sins can no longer enslave or drown us when we, empowered through God’s gift of faith, return to our Good Shepherd in repentance and faith, knowing that He will continue to “*restore our soul*” (Imperfect tense). The waters of Holy Baptism, which washed us clean, never run dry, but continue to cleanse us of our sins, now and forever.

Apart from Jesus Christ, there is no restoration of our souls, but with Him there is continual restoration of our souls.

Earlier I said that our good works are not done for our own good but for the good of others. That’s because we know that all our present and future needs are and will be continually given to us through our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. He’s got us covered!

So, when the turbulent waters of this life threaten us, or even take away some of our earthly blessings in this world, fear not! For God can and does work even through the turbulent waters of life to bless His Church. Therefore we, with the writer of Hebrews “*confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’*” (Hebrews 13:6). Even in death we will be victorious through Jesus Christ our Lord! For, through the green pastures and still waters of His Word and Baptism He “*[restores our souls],*” again and again and again...!

Such certain promises, which result in our peace of mind, are like a magnet which draw us, and others through us, to our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and His life creating and sustaining Word and Sacraments.

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