

**Sermon - Easter 4, Year B**  
**Good Shepherd Sunday (Psalm 23)**  
**4/21/24**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This fourth Sunday of Easter in the liturgical year is sometimes known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The Gospel gives us Jesus’ own proclamation: “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays his life down for his sheep.” Our readings on this Sunday are harmonized by the familiar lines of the twenty-third psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.” In the Episcopal Church, the psalms that we recite and sing together come from a translation in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and yet it is always somewhat wonderful when I can tell that the instinct of the community is to recite Psalm 23 with the famous text from the King James.

The first time I ever set about to preach on Psalm 23, I was captivated by the fifth verse: *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.* At the time, I had just begun reading one of the most remarkable books I’ve ever read in my entire life, *He Leadeth Me*, the memoirs of Jesuit priest, Father Walter Ciszek. The subtitle of his biography is: *An Extraordinary Testament of Faith*. Fr. Ciszek was captured by the Russian army during the second World War and accused of being a Vatican spy. He was tried and convicted, and he spent twenty-three agonizing years in Soviet prisons and in the labor camps of Siberia. His memoir speaks of the loneliness and terror he endured, and how he nearly surrendered to the psychological darkness that threatened to overcome his faith. But God was with him. In prayer, he came to see even his inhuman work of backbreaking toil in the Siberian salt mines as something that he could offer to God. He found himself being drawn closer to Jesus, his Good Shepherd who does not abandon even a single sheep.

In the midst of torture, Fr. Cizek found grace. *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.*

What a breathtaking idea. To think that even in the midst of horror, our cup runneth over. There is something so bold and eternal and defiant about this – to imagine ourselves in the worst place we’ve ever been, the worst pain we’ve ever felt, and to be met by a God who demands nothing but that we hold up our cups to be filled. What a blessing it is to preach about our Savior, Jesus Christ, who not only preserves us during times of trial, but makes a way through our suffering into abundance and joy.

The second time I preached on the twenty-third Psalm, I went back to Fr. Cizek’s book. I didn’t want to give the same sermon as the first time, but I imagined that the fifth verse about the table in the presence of enemies and the cup and the abundance was a good place to start. I opened the book to a fortuitous page, and I encountered this – Fr. Cizek wrote: “I learned to pray for my interrogators, not so they would see things my way or come to the truth so that my ordeal would end, but because they too were children of God and human beings in need of his blessing and daily grace.”

At first, I had been stunned by the beauty of the image of God spreading a table before me in the presence of enemies. But an even more stunning revelation is the reality that when God spreads this table, the table is meant for the enemies too. The table spread before Fr. Cizek was for him, but it was also for those who were responsible for his torture. The cup that runneth over is meant for us, but it is also meant for the person we struggle to love, the political party we struggle to understand, even the people we may – at one time or another – have considered our enemy. God spreads the table out before us, piled high with abundance even in the midst of trial, and when it is impossible for us to prepare another place there, we find (sometimes to our horror!) that God has already added a leaf to the table and poured the coffee.

That second revelation about the table being meant for the enemies too was not an easy one, but I was hardly prepared for what came next. The third time I was appointed to preach on the twenty-third psalm, I returned to the fifth verse: *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.* This time I was captivated by a portion of Fr. Ciszek's book where he writes about being overcome by despair. There was a point, several years into his sentence, when he believed himself to have been abandoned by God. There was a nugget of doubt within him. A kernel of anger. Who among us would not find ourselves battling with resentment or hateful thoughts. To be honest, I don't know a single adult person of faith who has not, at one time or another, wanted to scream at the apparent absence of an allegedly almighty God.

And it hit me: *sometimes...I am the enemy.* Sometimes, we are the enemy. We are the one who hurts another person. We are the one who judges poorly or with hardness of heart. We are the one who has stolen or lied or cheated or gossiped or turned away from someone's need - sometimes, we are the enemy. And that table of treasure, ripe for the feast, will still be waiting for us.

And so this one verse of Psalm 23 contains within it the magnitude of God's generosity and God's forgiveness. This one verse speaks to the heart of the human condition. When we are starving in the darkness, God will provide. It may infuriate us for a time, but that provision will also be offered to the people we least hope to expect at the table. But this generosity is nothing but joyful gift, because in those moments when we ourselves are the obstinate, the persecutor, the selfish, we will be graciously shepherded back to our own place at the heavenly banquet. *This* is the goodness and mercy that follows us – all the days of our life. Amen.