

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 17, 2016

Look to the Good Shepherd

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

April 17, 2016

Psalm 23

The last time I wrote a sermon on Psalm 23, it was just three years ago this week, just a few days after the terrorist attack during the Boston Marathon. In that message I recalled the infamous 9-11 attack in 2001 when terrorists hijacked four airplanes and crashed two into the Twin Towers in New York and one into the Pentagon in Washington, DC. The fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania after passengers fought with the hijackers.

In the three years since that last sermon on Psalm 23, terrorism, both domestic and foreign, has not abated. ISIS, al Qaida and their followers continue to spread their campaigns of evil everywhere and our politicians talk about it, argue about it, and have few answers as to how to combat it.

They try to lay blame on good people for the sins of a few, they look for scapegoats, and that is nothing new. It is reaction to fear, fear of the unknown.

I can remember December 7, 1941 when Japanese war planes attacked Pearl Harbor and the same sort of fear arose in everyone's mind. President Franklin D. Roosevelt called it "a day of infamy", which indeed it was --- as was 9/11 --- as was the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building by Timothy McVeigh --- as was the attack on innocent school children and their teachers in Newtown, CT --- as was and are the continuing horrors inflicted on the world by al Qaida and ISIS and their followers.

We reacted in exactly the wrong way to the Pearl Harbor attack by incarcerating innocent Japanese-American citizens in internment camps. That also is something that will live in infamy.

Some of our Presidential candidates are falling into the same infamous trap by proposing similar actions toward Muslim-Americans, who, like the Japanese-Americans, have done no wrong.

The evil of al Qaida and ISIS are not Islam --- they are perversions of that religion --- perversions which have led, and are continuing to lead, to far more deaths and oppression of Muslims than of any other group.

Similarly in World War II, the great majority of Japanese and Germans were innocent of the horrors inflicted by their leaders yet they were all tarred with the same brush.

In the current atmosphere of fear the American people are quick to forget that most terrorism in this country is by people who claim to be Christians or who were brought up as Christians. The problem isn't religion. It is Satan. It is greed, it is lust for power, it is insanity --- it is not religion.

We live in an evil world and the struggle between God and Satan seems never ending --- but it will end. It will end when Christ returns and defeats Satan and his minions once and for all.

The 23rd Psalm is the best known and loved piece of scripture in the Bible. I read it a few minutes ago using the version in our pew Bibles but most of us know it by heart in another version, that of the King James Bible.

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.” (KJV)

God is the only thing we really need in this world. He provides us with every necessity.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” (KJV)

For a sheep, “green pastures” and “still waters” mean security, tranquility and rest. Our Good Shepherd provides us with food, drink and shelter --- the basic necessities of life. We depend solely upon God “for his name’s sake.”

“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.” (KJV)

“The psalm does not pretend that evil and death do not exist. Terrible things happen, and they happen to good people as well as to bad people. Even the paths of righteousness lead through the valley of the shadow. Death lies ahead for all of us, saints and sinners alike, and for all the ones we love. The psalmist doesn't try to explain

evil. He doesn't try to minimize evil. He simply says he will not fear evil. For all the power that evil has, it doesn't have the power to make him afraid." (Listening to Your Life, Frederick Buechner, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1992).

When we are threatened, when we are fearful, God will still provide for us. As Christians we must believe that. God doesn't promise us an easy life, nor a life free from evil --- He promises us salvation. Look to Christ in prayer. The troubles of the present time will eventually pass.

In referring to 9/11, the devotional booklet These Days (September 11, 2014) said, *"We know there is evil, life can be dangerous and trouble can happen.*

"Troubles are inevitable. God offers comfort in troubling times ... Receiving comfort is more about being strengthened than being soothed. It is more about resolve than relief ... God promises to come alongside us in troubling times.

"Discovering God's presence gives us comfort so that our circumstances do not define us. Relying on God's protection and guidance, 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair ... struck down, but not destroyed' (2 Corinthians 4:8-9, NRSV)."

The struggle against al Qaida and ISIS has been going on for fifteen years and it is a long way from being over. Don't look for scapegoats in this struggle. The problem is not an entire religion or an entire nationality, it is Satan --- remember that.

"The way we live now is colored by how we anticipate the future. If we dread the future, any change is dangerous. If the future is anticipated with hope, then each unfolding moment is an opportunity. God gives us 'new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope, and so we look forward to possessing the rich blessings that God gives his people.' (1 Peter 1:3 TEV)" (These Days, September 12, 2014).

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

That is God's promise to us.

Amen.