

HEBREW SCRIPTURE: Psalm 23

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ he restores my soul.^[b]
He leads me in right paths^[c]
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,^[d]
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely^[e] goodness and mercy^[f] shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.^[g]

Footnotes:

- a. Psalm 23:2 Heb *waters of rest*
- b. Psalm 23:3 Or *life*
- c. Psalm 23:3 Or *paths of righteousness*
- d. Psalm 23:4 Or *the valley of the shadow of death*
- e. Psalm 23:6 Or *Only*
- f. Psalm 23:6 Or *kindness*
- g. Psalm 23:6 Heb *for length of days*

EPISTLE: Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth,^[a] called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵ He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body^[b] through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.^[c] ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.^[d] ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually^[e] into a dwelling place for God.

Footnotes:

- a. [Ephesians 2:11](#) Gk *in the flesh*
- b. [Ephesians 2:16](#) Or *reconcile both of us in one body for God*
- c. [Ephesians 2:16](#) Or *in him, or in himself*
- d. [Ephesians 2:20](#) Or *keystone*
- e. [Ephesians 2:22](#) Gk *in the Spirit*

GOSPEL: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them,

and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things...

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

It's one of those big questions of life...vanilla? Or chocolate? Oh, it's *not* a big question you say? Well, what if you took five of your closest relatives in your car to the ice cream shop...and they only served vanilla or chocolate? And, what if the rule of the ice cream shop was that there was only one ice cream flavor per family? Who's not having ice cream tonight? Who's going to fuss and be told to "stay in the car if you don't want to have 'our' flavor"?

Here's another one: Brownies. With nuts? Or without?

When I was in seminary back in 2000-2003, these were the types of "arguments" that we would have at the lunch table with a group of friends. Leslie was an archivist for Union Theological Seminary in New York City -- now you know how we met. And, if you ask Leslie, she has strong opinions about ice cream flavors (vanilla) and nuts in her brownies (no).

Silly? Maybe. But it was the type of conversations we'd have in seminary to take a break from the intense study of theology, scripture, religious history, and the study of ancient languages and cultures not to mention the horrors of our then current day which included being in the city when planes flew into the side of buildings called the Twin Towers.

But let's talk about more serious topics -- like the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Here's a true story: In the early 1980s the Open Bible Church of Belle Fourche, South Dakota had a serious decision to make about their sanctuary: burgundy or blue carpet? Burgundy won. And the decision split the church. The blue carpet people went across town and founded the Christian Life Center where Leslie's family landed post Carpet War. Crazy right?

In the unnamed town of Woodbury, CT, there are two Congregational Churches. (Oh, did I just name it?) Want to know why? In 1814, the Woodbury Congregational Church had outgrown its building and needed to build a larger facility. There was a disagreement as to the location; and, when no agreement could be made, the congregation split and built two almost identical buildings less than a half mile from each other. 0.4 to be exact.

Oh, but it's not the Congregationalists! It's not just the UCC! We have the United Methodist Church. But there is also the African Methodist Episcopal Church. African Methodist Episcopal (wait for it...) Zion Church, Church of the Nazarene, Christian

Methodist Episcopal Church, Free Methodist Church, Methodist Church of Great Britain, United Church of Australia, Wesleyan Church. Did you count that list? All Methodist...but divided. That was 9. I'm sure I'm missing some more.

Someone put out on the World Wide Web that there are 33000 denominations in the world! (<http://www.philvaz.com/apologetics/a106.htm>). I'm not saying that he is right; but why doesn't that number surprise many of us this morning?

More important question -- and the one I've been leading us to this morning -- what makes us *include* some...and *exclude* others? What is it about us? We human beings that need to differentiate to the point of a number of denominations that we can't even count? What is it about we humans that we are so driven by differentiation, which divides us, rather than finding the things that unites us?

What is it about human beings that we are so driven to define who is "us" and who is "them"? To decide who is "in" and who is "out"?

Can I be real with you this morning? Can I be authoritative with you this morning? It...has...got...to...stop...

If you have walked through these doors this morning, Something Greater Than You has called you here. My words may disturb you this morning. My words may affirm you this morning. But we all know that the level of division and the layers of division in our lives are harming us and not helping us.

So let's talk about our Psalm this morning. And this letter to the Ephesians. And our Gospel. Because I'm thinking we have a lot of fodder that the Holy Spirit wants us to chew on this morning about division and unity. And it may be too much for you...or me...or us...But we are all being asked to at least take a bite.

Because we know that we can divide over the flavor of ice cream or nuts in our brownies. And we're divided about our president. And we're divided over what should happen to the people at the border. And we're divided about what the US relationship should be with Russia and with North Korea.

But, we are here this morning together. And you might say, "I'm here because this is what I do on a Sunday morning." And you might say, "I'm here because I got dragged here by my well meaning parents." And you might say, "I'm here this morning because I'm lonely", or "because this is my family", or "because I like the music", or "because I need to pray", or "because I hope to God that this new pastor will say something that is at least a little relevant!" Or you might say, "I don't know why I'm here this morning."

But here we are. So, let's listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us this morning.

And, this morning, it all starts out with Ephesians. This letter, written to the people of Ephesus, is a *showstopper*. Because it challenges *everything* I've been talking about today. From ice cream flavors, to brownies with or without nuts, to carpet colors in sanctuaries, to 33000 denominations, to politics, to world affairs.

This letter to the Ephesians was working on *bridging* a gap -- *not* make a new one. And the gap that this letter was bridging was not a puddle jump...it was the Grand Canyon.

The letter to the Ephesians was bridging the gap between the circumcised and the uncircumcised.

...I can see that I have left some of you unimpressed because I didn't hear your gasps of surprise, shock or horror. So many men gathered here today are circumcised or had their sons circumcised simply because in the United States that is what we do in our hospitals at birth.

But in Ancient times, for our Jewish Ancestors, circumcision meant that you were followers of the One True God. Not circumcised? Not a follower. Circumcised *in!* Uncircumcised *out!* Jews *in.* Gentiles *out.*

But then, Jesus came. And then Paul followed Jesus. And the Risen Christ sent Paul to the non-Jews. The non-circumcised -- which was just crazy!

For *thousands* of years, to prove that you were a real follower of the God we pledge our allegiance and love to, the way that we showed it was by circumcision.

And yet, the letter to the Ephesians was to people who were *not* circumcised and they were *not being told to get circumcised.* They were not being told to wait in the car until everyone else had their vanilla ice cream.

In an audacious and inspired -- by the Holy Spirit moment -- the writer of Ephesians was expressing -- in a time when circumcision was the be all and end all and -- drop the mike -- all that there was to be said -- that this belief that we had put our whole being into for several *thousand* years was no...longer...relevant. Let that sink in for just a moment.

This isn't ice cream. Or carpet. Or denominations. This is a deeply, deeply held belief that if you believe in and love and follow the One True God that you will cut the foreskin of your male children. And suddenly, after millennia of doing so -- which worked just fine for *thousands of years* -- the faithful discernment is that, things...have...changed.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians says that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, *everything has changed.* That even those who do not fit the ancient code are included. That the new Gospel is one of *inclusion* and not exclusion. Oh my.

Really! How did these people 2000 years ago, so simple, so primitive surpass us today? Really!

In the ancient world for thousands of years, the Jews had been the only Chosen people of the God we worship. That was it and that was all!...*And then it wasn't anymore.* The Gentiles weren't just outsiders; they were *despised* by the Jews. And yet, suddenly, they were included -- *all* people --were being included in God's grace. Two thousand years ago, barriers were being torn down. There is no more division between insiders and outsiders, the chosen and the rejected. (churchofscotland.org). Without this change, most of us would not be here today, because most of us descended from Gentiles not Jews!

Hear these words from the letter again,

¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made *both groups into one* and has *broken down the dividing wall*, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself *one new humanity* in place of

the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body^[b] through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.^[c] ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...

We humans have such a capacity to exclude and to divide, yet our God appeals to us to include and reconcile. God has one group -- and we're all in it. All invited. So, if God only has one group, why don't we?

Who are we excluding? Who have we deemed not good enough for God's grace? Those are the hard hitting questions that we need to ask about ourselves as a church and also about ourselves as individuals and in our other social groups. Do we have those who are "in" and those who are "out"?

Here is a related question that may be just as important: Who isn't here this morning because they *think* they are not included, or because they *think* that the Church is made up of a bunch of excluders? How well known is it that Mary Taylor Memorial is a Reconciling Church that welcomes people of all gender and sexual identities? How well known is it that Mary Taylor Memorial reaches out to the world in mission and unites people who are different instead of separating them? In a world where it is simply assumed that everyone is choosing who is in and who is out, and where churches often participate in this common behavior, how will those who think their excluded or who expect to be excluded know that they are included *here*?

In our Gospel lesson this morning we heard about people who saw Jesus and his disciples out in a boat on the lake, traveling to the other side -- a deserted place. And, upon seeing them, they hurried there on foot and arrived ahead of them. By the time he went ashore, there was a great crowd of people yearning for Jesus, yearning to be healed, yearning for a word of comfort. And, we are told that Jesus had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Notice it didn't say, "Jesus saw the great crowd and divided them into groups -- Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, holy and unholy. He didn't check to see if they had the right passport or the right stamp. He taught them all. And as he traveled about, he healed those who were brought to him without distinction.

Folks, that essential human yearning for God's grace is still with us to this very day. Jesus includes. God includes. Who are we excluding? Who thinks they are being excluded because we haven't reached out to let them know they are included? Who thinks they are excluded because we haven't made it clear they are included? And how can we do that better?

This morning we read together:

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ he restores my soul.^[b]
He leads me in right paths^[c]
for his name's sake.

This psalm washes over us like a great wave of grace. It soothes us and settles us. It reminds us that "the Lord is our Shepherd". But there are many still who are like sheep without a shepherd.

Who are we excluding? Who thinks they are being excluded because we haven't reached out to let them know they are included? Who thinks they are excluded because we haven't made it clear they are included? And how can we do that better?

This morning, I invite us as the Body of Christ in this place and in this time, and I invite us as individuals to recommit to radical inclusion, to discern where we are contributing to exclusion, and to breaking down the barriers that divide us. Blessings on the journey. Amen.