

A Table in the Battle

Psalm 23

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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Everyone loves the 23rd psalm. I've read it at every funeral I've ever done. I memorized it in the fourth grade in order to win some prize I've long since forgotten—but I remember the words of the psalm. It's comforting to think of God as the one who leads us to green pastures, still waters, and through the valley of the shadow. Every pastor has had the experience of reciting the 23rd psalm to someone in the hospital who is near death and apparently not responsive, but when you begin to say "The Lord is my shepherd" the patient's lips begin to mouth the words.

Once long ago I was asked to give a sermon to a room full of homeless people in Manhattan before they received a bag of groceries. Listening to me was the price they had to pay to receive the food. I was preaching on Romans 8, how nothing can separate us from God's love, trying to convince myself that it was true even in the case of these homeless people. One of the older ladies spoke up and said, "That reminds me of the 23rd psalm, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.'" Then a man in the back chimed in, "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters." Others spoke up until they had gone through the whole psalm. Those promises were more real to them than they were to me when I was young.

But I want you to think this morning about verse 5. It may be the one verse of the psalm you have never heard a sermon about: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." I used to stumble over that verse and want to skip over it. You are reading all this nice imagery about sheep and a shepherd—pastureland and ponds and valleys, shepherds' clubs and shepherds' crooks—but then my imagination can't quite make the jump to a table set before me. If your mind is as strange as mine, you process it all like a cartoon. Those sheep are the ones in cartoons that have to be protected by the dog from the big bad wolf. All of a sudden the sheep are sitting upright in chairs at a table. The shepherd is spreading out a tablecloth and laying out the fine china. How are the sheep going to use knives and forks? In the background you see the big bad wolf. He's watching, but the shepherd is not going to let him come to the table.

That makes no sense, of course. A better way to read the psalm is to see a break. Verse five is the beginning of the second stanza of the poem. The first stanza compares God to a shepherd; the second stanza compares God to a host. You are not a sheep any more. You are a human; you are you and you have enemies. You are in the heat of battle. You are looking to God to protect you. But here is the surprise: God does not wipe out your enemies. God prepares a feast for you. Right there in the midst of battle with your enemies watching the Lord spreads a table. Right there in the midst of battle God says "Come into my house. Be my guest. Sit at my table and enjoy." He welcomes you as a guest in the traditional Middle Eastern way: he takes some perfumed oil and rubs it into your scalp, making you smell good and feel good. He fills your cup with wine—not halfway, not being cheap, but until your cup is overflowing. He doesn't care. He has plenty. When you came into God's house, when you came to his table, it was because enemies were chasing you, but do you see who is chasing you now? The only ones chasing you are God's goodness and God's love, as they always have been, and now they have caught you—and you will remain a guest in God's house forever, because you realize that you are finally at home.

Still, do there have to be enemies? In a psalm of comfort, why do we have to mention enemies? If I'm preaching a funeral, I don't want to remind people that the deceased had enemies who are glad he is dead. And yet here it is. God got you through the valley of the shadow of death and you *still* have enemies. Yeah, that's the way it is. One of the facts of life is the reality of enemies. That word "enemies" is found in the book of Psalms 68 times. Roughly a third of the songs are crying out to God to do something terrible to our enemies—a desire we have to rein in because of what Jesus told us about *loving* our enemies—but the fact that we will have enemies has not changed.

When I was growing up I thought that if you were a good boy people would like you. But at some point we all discover that there are people who hate you precisely because you are a good boy. There are other people who don't like you for no apparent reason. There are others you make mad because you stand for truth and justice. Eventually you figure out that the Christian life is not a way to avoid conflict and have a stress-free life.

You would have known that from the start if you'd paid attention to the stories of Jesus' life. It's just one conflict after another and they didn't end well. Look at the early church and the apostles. Enemies galore. Unfortunately, some of us weren't told about that when we became Christians. We thought we were signing up for a life of being nice. And when people are mean to us, we wonder if God is really doing his part. "I'm doing what you said and it's making people mad!" When we glare up at God he turns our gaze to the cross and says, "Who exactly did you think you were following? Did you believe in another Jesus who had no enemies?"

So we, too, find ourselves in conflict. But here is the surprising thing I did not begin to learn until mid-life. God's grace does not dry up because we are in a battle. Those natural feelings of anger and the drive for self-preservation that kick in do not drive God's presence away. When we are harassed by enemies, this is what God does: he invites us into his house and spreads a table for us; he welcomes us and feeds us and takes care of us like Big Mama.

In the Reformed tradition it is a very big deal that this object here is a table and not an altar. An altar is a place where you offer a sacrifice, and for Catholics the symbolism of the altar is that Jesus is sacrificed in the Mass over and over to appease the Father and bring us forgiveness. But for us this is a table. It should have legs and look like a dinner table you could actually eat at, because that is what it represents. It is the Lord's Table—the table that is prepared for us in the presence of our enemies and the table that was prepared by Jesus in the presence of his enemies.

Meals are important. Often when I've done funerals the families have collected pictures of the loved one who has died and displayed them on large posters or foam board. Many of those pictures show people gathered around a table—at holidays, on vacation, at a fun meal at a restaurant. There is something about gathering around a table that signifies something deeper—and maybe something yet to come. I keep a picture on my refrigerator that shows my family of origin at a Thanksgiving dinner. My mother is in the center, smiling a broad untroubled smile that she had more often after she got Alzheimer's than before. And around her are my three brothers and my sister and my father and I, with a table absolutely loaded with food. It makes me happy to look at that picture, just as it makes me happy to look at this table.

On the Thursday night before he was to go to die, Jesus sat at a table like that with his real family, those who had chosen to follow him. With conflict raging all around him and his enemies plotting against him, Jesus prepared a table, this table. He filled the cup to overflowing and said, "Here, this is the cup of my blood, flowing for you; this is the life I am giving you—drink my life in just as you drink this cup tonight."

Several times I have been called to the hospital when a church member was near death because that person wanted to receive the Lord's Supper one last time. The only table you have is that movable tray that fits over the hospital bed. You take your portable kit with a tiny plate and little cups and a small plastic bottle of juice. But when you prepare that table you are acutely aware that you are preparing it in the presence of the last enemy, death. You are preparing it in the presence of cancer or kidney failure or whatever has been identified by the doctors as the enemy. When you prepare that table you are in the Lord's house, you are being welcomed, you are being comforted and nourished by the one whose love has pursued you all your life.

Today Jesus has prepared this table before you in the midst of whatever battles you are facing. In the presence of your enemies he invites you to feast on his life and be comforted, be welcomed. There is nothing your enemies can do to take that away from you. Enjoy.