

Psalm 23
Lent in Plain Sight: Oil
Lent 5
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Scripture: Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 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. 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. 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 forever. (KJV)

Sermon: Lent in Plain Sight: Oil

I've never been here
though I know it exists
somewhere beyond
my power to make it happen
a table is ready and waiting
in the presence of my enemies
an oasis in the Sahara
awaits my arrival with
more than enough oil
to anoint my head and
water to quench my thirst.

These words were written by Palmer Seminary professor Dr. Elouise Renich Fraser in response to her reflections on Psalm 23 and the hospitable host who "prepares a table in the presence of enemies."

Google: Guelta d'Archei pics

As she reflected, she recalled pictures she had seen of Guelta d'Archei, an oasis, in the heart of the Sahara Desert. A guelta is a peculiar type of wetland, typical of desert regions, formed when underground water comes to the surface and creates permanent pools and reservoirs. Guelta d'Archei is in north-eastern Chad,

hidden behind a canyon. Its waters are sheltered by the towering sandstone cliffs typical of this region. Every day, hundreds of camels are herded into the knee-deep water of the guelta for them to drink and rest. Given this explanation, Guelta d'Archei seems like a near perfect image as we imagine lying down by still waters, even if not in green pastures.

But the professor's description continues as she explains that dung from thousands of camels excreted over hundreds of years has turned the water black. Lurking in the black waters is a small group of surviving Nile crocodiles, which feed on fish that survive on the algae that thrive on the waters fertilized by camel droppings. Guelta d'Archei is a zoological marvel, but with its poop filled black water, it is probably not what you envision as you reflect on the "still waters" and certainly not the "table set" for us of today's psalm. But what if these still waters and this table are not for us? What if the One who shepherds us to places of peace and safety and invites us to dine at Their table does the same for all creatures? In so many ways, more ways than we will ever fully grasp, our cups are running over in ways that are just right for each of us as individuals. I want to believe that God sees and connects in unique ways with all of creation and this psalm makes me think the psalmist wanted to believe that too.

One of the things I love about this psalm is that its rich metaphors have the capacity, if we will allow them, to provide comfort amid so many of life's difficult moments. Psalm 23 is more than a funeral reading as we grieve. It is a source of courage as we live.

In her book, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, Nein Cheng tells the story of her arrest during the first days of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, her more than six years' confinement, release, persecution, efforts to leave China, and early life in exile. While she was incarcerated, her captors attempted to force her to make a false confession. Describing one attempt, she writes, "I was silently reciting to myself the 23rd Psalm, 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want . . .' [. . .] The man with the tinted spectacles and the man from the police department were looking at me thoughtfully. They mistook my silence as a sign of weakening. I knew I had to show courage. In fact, I felt much better for having recited the words of the psalm. I had not been so free of fear the whole evening as I was in that moment standing beside the black jeep, a symbol of repression. I lifted my head and said in

a loud and firm voice, 'I'm not guilty! I have nothing to confess.'”

We’ve heard this psalm read at funerals, recited by our mothers and grandmothers, and if you grew up in the church, you were likely encouraged to memorize it yourself. And if you did memorize it, I bet there is a good chance you memorized it from the King James Version. In this psalm, God is compared to both a good shepherd and a gracious host. I’ve noticed preachers and Sunday School lessons mostly focus on the shepherd part, leading, restoring, walking, and comforting. And I find that fascinating since few of us have a frame of reference in which we can relate to a shepherd. Most of us have never been a shepherd, nor have we been sheep. On the other hand, most of us have been a host and a guest.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

What does it mean that a table was prepared “in the presence of my enemies?” Imagine being a stranger in a strange land. Just as immigrants and refugees are vulnerable today, they were so in ancient Israel. Being a “stranger” was dangerous. Because of that, Jewish households were expected to be a place of refuge for strangers as they were surrounded by people who were potentially their enemies, people who might harm them. The importance of hospitality in the Jewish tradition, even to strangers, maybe especially to strangers, cannot be overstated. It was a big deal.

Through this psalm, we are invited to imagine that God is a host who invited an endangered stranger into Their home in which a large feast has been prepared. In addition to the abundant food offered, the host offers a generous supply of olive oil for the guest’s head which provided relief from the drying effects of the day’s sun and was a way of bestowing honor on the welcomed guest. It was over the top hospitality. The cup of the guest truly runs over as they imagine being

honored by the Holy and dwelling in the Holy's presence in safety, comfort, and abundance forever.

As I mentioned earlier, this week the ordinary object we are reflecting on is oil. It was easy for me to think about the ways in which we might encounter oil in our lives. There's the oil used to cook our French fries and the oil we use in our salad dressings. There's the oil we slather on as we bake in the sun and the oil we use to remove our makeup at bedtime. There is the oil we need to keep our cars running and the oil we mix with gas to power our weed eaters. And the oil we aren't supposed to dump on babies anymore, which is the same oil we put in our baths that causes the next person to slip when they get in the tub. So much oil.

In the biblical narrative, oil is common as well and most often it is used as part of ancient rituals, like the one described in Psalm 23. I spent some time reflecting this week on some of the times oil is used in biblical stories.

For example, in the parable of the Merciful Samaritan in Luke 10, a man was robbed and beaten and left for dead in a ditch. Religious leaders passed by and did nothing to help him. Unexpectedly, a Samaritan came along and helped the man. This was "unexpected" because Jewish people would not have expected anything good to come from Samaria. The Samaritans were "the others" because they didn't believe the right things.

In the Samaritan's story, oil was used to promote healing, "But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him." Oil as an aid for healing was common in the first century world. Oil was also used to anoint priests for service, to anoint kings upon their coronation, and oil was used to anoint bodies for burial.

Though our roots are in ancient Judaism, anointing people with oil is much less common in our tradition today. I've been thinking about why that might be. Certainly, a little anti-bacterial cream on wounds has taken the place of oil and wine. But from a ritualistic standpoint, for the most part, in the protestant tradition, oil isn't used much anymore. While our faith ancestors were pretty much limited to olive oil, we have all kinds of oil with which to anoint, yet we

don't. Could it be because to anoint someone we need oil, but we need one other thing too. Proximity.

The act of anointing someone with oil, whether for healing, hospitality, setting someone apart for a specific role or office, or even anointing a body for burial, cannot be done from a distance. It requires the one who is anointing and the one who is anointed to be close to one another. Close enough, in fact, to touch. In her book, *Lent in Plain Sight*, Jill Duffield writes about the use of oil in the parable of the Merciful Samaritan, "Just as the cruelty of the robbery entailed physical, close contact, so does the mercy that seeks to amend the injuries and pain. Healing cannot happen from a distance. Compassion moves us to act, to get into the ditch, to pour oil on wounds and bandage them, to ensure the person brutalized and violated knows another side to humanity, and to strangers."¹

While olive oil does have some anti-inflammatory and anti-bacterial properties, the true healing came in the form of the very hands-on compassion that was shown by the Samaritan. Circling back to Psalm 23, where we have the ritual of anointing a guest's head with oil, we can imagine it wasn't the actual oil that made the guest suddenly feel honored and included. The true welcome came from the attention, in this case, hands-on attention, he received from the host as the oil was poured over his head.

Think for a minute about what makes you feel welcome in someone else's home. When I was young and went with my brother to visit my grandparents, we knew we were important to them because they stopped everything they were doing and paid attention to us. Whether we were staying for a few hours or a week, everything they did was centered on my brother and me. But even beyond grandparents, isn't it the attention of the host, whoever that is, that makes you feel welcome? In the story of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha's house, Jesus affirms Mary as she stopped work and paid attention to him.

But the truth is, Martha's bustling around and preparation was a form of welcome too. Like when your favorite dessert is served or the table is set with special place settings, or your host takes your coat and asks you what you want to drink. All of it says, "Welcome...here you are an honored guest." One of the ways we show we love people is by knowing how they like to be welcomed. One of my sons likes to

¹ Duffield, Jill, *Lent in Plain Sight*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2020, 125.

be welcomed with meatloaf, the other with lasagna. Meatloaf and lasagna are sort of rituals in our family.

These rituals, the ones with oil and other rituals like baptism and communion, have a way of changing our perception of who we are. These rituals help us see and experience ourselves as:

WELCOMED

HEALED

CALLED

SACRED

BELOVED

CLAIMED

VALUED

They remind us that, even when we have been given more lemons than lemonade, this life is still overflowing with beauty, goodness, and mercy. In his book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, anthropologist Victor Turner wrote about our human need to create meaning of the world around us. He writes that we do that largely through symbols. Specifically, through religious rituals, he writes that symbols connect the known, visible world with the unknown, invisible spirit world.² Rituals connect us with the holy mystery of the Universe and our place within that mystery. Rituals have the power to change us, not because the oil or the water or the wine or the bread are magical, but because they remind us to, in the words of composer and playwright, Lin Manuel Miranda, to

“Look around, look around,
Look at where you are
Look at where you started
The fact that you're alive is a miracle...”

As I thought about rituals and the ways we use them in this community. On the original draft of the worship manuscript, I labeled the parts of the service that are rituals for us. I ended up taking those labels out, so they don't appear in your bulletin, but there were 6 of them. You may see more.

Bringing in the Light

² Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Reprint Edition)*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1995.

Sharing Prayer Requests

Lighting Prayer Candles

Lord's Prayer

Communion

Benediction

Each one of these rituals has its own purpose, but there is one broad purpose for all of them. They represent community; they are something we all do together. And, in a world that encourages us to be independent, to rely on nobody but ourselves, these ways of being community, of connecting with the Holy and with each other, are especially meaningful. We need each other desperately.

The rituals of any group, not just church groups, are ways in which groups are held together. A few years ago, a friend who was moving her business from one location to another asked me to come, before the business opened and perform some kind of ritual that highlighted her desire for that space to be a safe place for all people, to gather and to work. When the staff gathered for some training, I came and anointed the doorway of the business with oil and prayed that all who passed through that door would know they were welcome and loved. The oil wasn't magic oil. The ritual was meant to remind the staff of their worth and of their role in welcoming their customers and making them feel valued and loved too.

Because rituals hold groups together, there is value in faith communities participating in ancient rituals, changing and assigning new meaning to old rituals, and creating new rituals. And it is also important to talk about them, to explain them, and make sure we do whatever we can to help visitors and new members understand what we do and why we do it. AND to communicate our willingness to change all of it based on the lived experiences of this community.

In our pre-worship slideshow every week, there is a slide that says DCC is, "A church that is willing to be changed so that the world might be changed too." Our rituals should not only reflect who we were, but who we are, and who we want to be in the future. I hope this week you will reflect on the ways in which rituals are part of your life. What do those rituals tell you about yourself, other people, the world, and the holy? How can we use rituals to change us, even when change seems scary? And how can we use them to remind us that one thing never changes...we are loved more than we know. Amen.