

Proper 23

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Ps. 23 The Lord Is My Shepherd
Isaiah 25:1-9 The messianic banquet
Matthew 22:1-14 The parable of the wedding feast

(May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.)

"The White Rabbit put on his spectacles...

*[Put on your glasses and peer out over the top of them at
the
congregation for a second, as if this were a part of a
play.]*

'Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?' he asked.

'Begin at the beginning,' the King said, very gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end; then...stop.'

There was dead silence in the court."

Of course, at the end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the Queen wanted the sentence to be given before the verdict, which was exactly the opposite of normal courtroom procedure...but, then, Lewis Carroll often altered one's perception of things by turning them around:

up was down,
right was left,
and endings were beginnings.

In the real world, it may sometimes SEEM like something out of a child's story book, but "turning around" (or changing one's perspective) is often the first step in "understanding" our adventure...our spiritual journey.

There are many times when the "end" does, in fact, come before the "beginning." Today's gospel reading, for example, deals with a wedding: A time when a man leaves his mother and father and cleaves to his wife. And the two shall become one flesh. A time of leaving (or ending) one life and entering into (or beginning) another. How many times have we seen this pattern and not recognized it for what it is...or not even accepted it as something..."real."

Today's reading of Psalm 23 is a case in point. It's often read at funerals, but in fact, it could just as easily be read at births, for the end of one thing is ALWAYS the beginning of another. And besides, this psalm really does describe the birthing process.

Listen, again, to the words that have become all too familiar to most of us...
at the quiet peacefulness of a baby in the womb...
a baby that describes its faith to anyone who will listen

*"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;"*

And then...as the birthing process begins,
the turning...away from those others in the womb...to one who is
outside.
The travail and the focusing on what is not yet seen.

The psalmist, instead of talking to anyone who has ears to hear, begins talking to the Lord:

*"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."*

In sign language, the birth of a baby is given as *[Show the American Sign Language for "birth"]* a turning. Like the baby, turning in the

womb, before it can be born into the world, the psalmist must turn his focus, too, before he can be born of the Spirit.

And like the newborn that is received into the arms of one who awaits its arrival, who is washed and fed...the psalmist, too, acknowledges his own reception:

*"thou annointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over."*

Not only does this "new place" have a new way of breathing, it has a new way of seeing...and a new way of living. In a way, it's out of one house and into another:

For the baby, out of the womb and into the world.
For the psalmist, out of the world and into God's kingdom.

But that place in which we live...that "house" has many levels of understanding:

The baby is received into someone's arms.
It is enfolded, encircled, or taken into...another being.
The baby is "made one" with another...or...taken "into" that person's "house."

And the psalmist?

He is taken into God's awaiting arms and becomes one with Him.

*"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."*

Patterns within patterns...

Trusting...waiting;

Turning around (taking a different focus);

Traversing difficult times (maybe even death),

basically, giving up the peace and tranquility of an earlier life
for the promise for something new;

Then, beginning anew;
And a coming together, again, in this new existence, with another being...
where yet another "oneness" takes place.

This is the circle of life.

Is it any wonder, then, that Jesus said:

*"You must turn and become like children
before you can enter the Kingdom of God"?*

In these houses that we call our bodies, each of us (man or woman) is pregnant with a Child of the Spirit. For Christians, this child has been conceived in baptism and fed through the placenta of the Holy Eucharist. And for most of us, this child is still waiting to be born.

I was given an insight into the universality of this process when I was sitting near the bank of Sligo Creek, a small river near my home. As it happened, I was fussing and fuming at God...about the state of the church and the state of the world. (I tend to do this quite often, particularly when I can't get across to others what seems so very clear to me...Why couldn't they see?!...)

Suddenly God sent a humongous creature running past me. (No White Rabbit with pink eyes, mind you...but a **very** large black dog.) It missed me by inches, and yet I didn't see it until it leaped into the creek right in front of me. And, just in case I might still have missed it, the animal proceeded to stand there and shake off a good share of the creek onto me!

Well folks, if I missed that dog until after I was sopping wet, I guess it was understandable that people missed seeing God clearly until they, too, came up out of the water. After all, how can an unborn child look into a parent's face?

But, to continue with the story, the dog leapt back onto the bank and raced away; and in a gentle voice, God said,

"In the water, but not of the water."

Suddenly, I was taken up into His arms...made one with him...and given a vision:

(Now, I must preface this vision with a statement of my own beliefs, for I have been trained as a scientist...and, as such, I believe in both the creation AND evolution...heaven help us. And I also believe that God is the ***Penultimate, Ideal Teacher***...He takes each of us from where we ARE and leads us to where He wants us to be...The *Lord*, after all, is our *shepherd*.)

In the vision, I had become a fish swimming around in the sea.

(Go ahead; try and imagine it! It doesn't hurt. Look up at the crossbeams of the church and imagine that they represent the top of the ocean. You can't see the triangular part of the roof because that's above the water line. But...back to the vision.)

It was long before the time of Man, long before mammals. I looked above me and only saw a silvery "sky." Under-the-sea was all there was to my world. There was no other world. There were dark caves, places to hide in, and there were mountains to explore. All sea creatures knew that the tallest mountains (from under the sea) had flat tops (they ended at the silvery sky).

But then, for some reason, I looked straight up...and because light is not refracted when one looks straight up, I could see beyond that barrier...something blue...I wondered about this, but to swim above the water line meant certain death. I would have to be willing to give up my life to obtain this new vision.

And, what God taught me was that even if you believe in evolution, at some time, you must come to the conclusion that some sea creature had to be willing to give up its life in order to gain a whole new perspective on its existence. It had to come up out of the water, like a baby being born, ending one life and beginning another.

And what the sea creature would have found was an island that extended up from the water line. As a fish, I might have called it--in fish talk, of course--a Holy Mountain, for it didn't exist in the "real world," under the sea. (Tall, "real" mountains had flat tops, remember?)

And on this mountain, there was a new way of living, a new way of being fed, a new way of breathing, and a new way of seeing. (Life on land is vastly different from life under the water.) A fish must be "born of the land"

before it can live on the **Land's** Holy Mountain. And only then will the world be seen more clearly and more completely.

If, at some point down the evolutionary chain, this fish chooses to reenter the water, it will forever be

"IN the water, not OF the water" anymore.

Jesus said, "I will make you fishers of men"...lifting them up out of the world and into the Kingdom of Heaven. In this spiritual analog, those who are born of the spirit may be "IN the world, but they are no longer OF the world." They are already on **God's** Holy Mountain. And...

*"On this mountain
Yahweh Sabaoth will prepare for all peoples
a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines..."*

Like the wedding feast.

And that, of course, brings us "full circle," back to this sermon's beginning. But the parable of the Wedding Feast, although involving the end of one kind of life and the beginning of another, tells what the people of God's Kingdom are like...and it does this by counter example. Once again, with a different focus.

Today's reading began with...

"The Kingdom of God is like...";

and it ended with someone being thrown into the outer darkness because of improper dress. So the questions that must be asked are these:

- If a fish born of land must eat, breath, and live differently... and a baby born of the world must do the same... then what of the child born of the Spirit?
- Do you honestly believe that Jesus' parable was talking about this world's clothing when he described the man who was not wearing the proper wedding garments?
- Do you honestly believe that there is a sign in the Kingdom of God that says: "Shirt and tie required"?

In God's kingdom, there is a new way of dressing, as well as a new way of living, breathing, and being fed.

*"A shoot springs from the stock of Jesse..."
(And we believe that this "shoot" is Jesus.)*

According to Isaiah (11:1-3),

*"He does not judge by appearances.
Integrity is the **loincloth** round his waist,
faithfulness the **belt** about his hips."*

These are the proper clothes! It's what's inside that counts!...a different perspective.

And what about this wonderful banquet? It, too, is not like this world's. It has been described in terms of this world so that we may understand that it's something wonderful. (But it's as difficult to describe this food as it is to describe 3-dimensions to a 2-dimensional creature. Try reading *Flatland* if you don't believe me.) Unless you've tasted its goodness, there is nothing that I can say that will prepare you for it.

Jesus said,

"I am fed by doing my father's will."

It seems logical, therefore, to ask: "If you do not do God's will, how can you expect to be fed by God?" If you do not tell the truth, how can you be born into the Kingdom of God and be received into the arms of (and made one with) the God of Truth. If you have not love?...How can you be made "one" with the God of Love.

"Love" after all "covers many sins."

"Covers..."

And therein lies the concept of clothing in His Kingdom.

Love, truth, integrity, faithfulness are what must be worn in order to be made one with God...in order to be a part of the wedding feast. If you do not wear this type of "clothing," then you do not belong in the Kingdom.

Blessed are they who's sins (or whatever they are ashamed of) are covered by what God deems to be right and proper. That is, blessed are they that are wearing the proper "clothes," for they are ALREADY doing the will of God, and will be fed at the Heavenly banquet.

Well...I've gone from Matthew to Psalms to Isaiah...and back to Matthew, again. The alpha and the omega, after all, are one and the pattern of birth and rebirth is as much a part of our past and present, as it is of our future.

Yesterday, well after writing this sermon, I happened upon a book, *Reason For Hope: A Spiritual Journey*, by Jane Goodall, whose study of chimpanzees in Tansania's Gombe Preserve forever altered the very definition of "humanity." She writes

"Traditionally, a story begins at the beginning. But what is the beginning? Is it the moment when I was born...?...or should we start earlier...the fertile egg that was biologically, magically, transformed into a baby? But that, really, is not the beginning. For the genes that were handed down to me by my parents were created long, long ago...So should the story begin with my parents...? Or perhaps we should go back to the first truly human creature that was born of ape-men parentage, or back to the first little warm-blooded mammal? Or should we go back and back through the mists of unknown time to when the first speck of life appeared on planet earth?..."

Even Alice was confused.

" 'Who are *you*?' said the Caterpillar..."

And she replied, "rather shyly, 'I--I hardly know, Sir, just at present--- at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

God's circle of Life involves change...rebirth...and spiritual evolution, for the entire world. But in order to experience the wonder and joy of this adventure, you must "turn around"...and TRUST IN GOD that all "endings" are merely "beginnings" in disguise.

Amen.