

## **GOD'S ABUNDANT TABLE**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, October 21, 2018  
based on II Samuel 15:1–14, 30, 17:27–29; Psalm 23:1–5a***

The sermon this morning is continuation of a fall sermon series on the twenty-third Psalm, entitled, "Beside Still Waters." Psalm 23 begins, "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." (Psalm 23:1–4) Then the psalm continues with the first part of verse 5, which will be our focus this morning: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." {prayer}

The phrase "thou preparest a table before me" refers of course to setting forth a meal. You will notice that I timed this sermon so that it lands on the same Sunday as our Scout pancake brunch; the Scouts are preparing a table for us right now! It is interesting how often food plays a significant role in Biblical passages. In our Sunday School classes for our older elementary aged children, we use a rotation model in which every five weeks the kids are in a room we called the "cooking room," because no matter what part of the Bible we are talking about, there always seems to be a food element at some key point in the story. Food is of course a fundamental part of living, so it makes sense that food would not only appear in Biblical sagas, but would also be used to symbolize certain spiritual truths; and this can very much be seen in Psalm 23.

Throughout the first four verses of the twenty-third Psalm, every line is full of shepherd imagery. From the opening phrase—"The Lord is my shepherd"—to the end of verse 4—"thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me"—the psalm consistently pictures God as a shepherd. But now in verse 5 the imagery shifts to the image of a gracious host: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies, thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over." Some interpreters have tried to insist that all this could still refer to the life of a Biblical shepherd with the sheep. The "table in the presence of enemies" would be a lush pasture with wolves all around. The "anointing with oil" would refer to putting bug repellent on sheep's heads; and the "cup running over" would refer to a water hole overflowing with water. Surely this stretches things a bit! It makes much more sense to recognize that David at this point in Psalm 23 is simply transitioning images from that of a shepherd to that of a host. German scholars like to say that Psalm 23 refers to God as "Hirt und Wirt"—shepherd and host—and while we cannot get the same clever word play in English, it is easy to see that the two images fit naturally together, because in Biblical times, shepherds often did serve in the role of host. In the ancient near east, one of the strong traditions among shepherds was a tradition of hospitality. If a weary traveler showed up at a shepherd's tent, the honorable shepherd would provide gracious hospitality, giving the traveler food and drink and refreshment. A prime example of this can be found in the story of Abraham, who while managing his flocks was approached by three mysterious travelers.

Genesis tells us that "When Abraham saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, bowed to the ground, and said, 'Do not pass by, but let a little water be brought to wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring bread, that you may refresh yourselves.'" [Genesis 18:3-5]. When they stayed, he not only brought bread, but prepared a full meal for them with a veal and cheese. He did not yet know that they were actually emissaries of God. But Abraham, an upright and righteous shepherd, was a gracious host.

So is it clear what is happening in Psalm 23. Having created the image of God as a good shepherd, the psalm now continues with the image of God as a gracious host. The message here is that we can find welcome and sustenance in God. When we are weary and weak, God receives us with grace, and would set before us an abundant table. God invites us into God's presence, to refresh our spirits and bestow blessing upon us.

At this point we may note a connection between Psalm 23 and multiple points in the Bible where God acted in history to provide abundant nourishment for weary travelers. When the people of Israel were wandering through the wilderness, God provided manna for them to eat and sources of water; and during the ministry of Jesus, when a large crowd had followed Jesus to a remote place, Jesus provided a miraculous feeding of the 5000. In these accounts, God provided literal food; but this was also symbolic for how God would provide spiritually all that we need.

"Thou preparest a table before me" is thus a powerful statement of the providence of God. But then the verse goes on, with a phrase that may strike us as odd: "Thou preparest a table before me *in the presence of mine enemies.*" This creates the rather unusual picture of someone enjoying a banquet while enemies are nearby. It is this verse that provides a primary reason for why Biblical scholars place the writing of psalm 23 during the rebellion of Absalom, because it was in the midst of that rebellion, when David had taken refuge in the town of Mahanaim, that he had precisely this experience of having a table prepared before him in the presence of his enemies.

The story of Absalom is a story that might seem ready-made for a TV series or a movie today; because it is a story loaded with sordid elements. Absalom was one of David's many sons, born to one of David's many wives. Absalom was the son of David's wife Maacah, and through Maacah David also had a daughter, Tamar. Absalom had an older brother named Amnon, who was born to David's wife, Ahinoam. So Absalom and Amnon were half-brothers, while Absalom and Tamar were full brother and sister. Now come the sordid parts of the story.

Amnon lusted after Tamar. He got her into a room and raped her. David, while a great king, was a less than attentive father; he did nothing to discipline Amnon. Absalom thereupon took vengeance into his own hands, and he murdered Amnon. David did nothing to discipline Absalom either but allowed him to live freely. Absalom came to realize, however, that David was not going to let him become the eventual king; so he decided to seize the throne for himself. In the Scripture passage from II Samuel 15 that was read earlier, we heard how Absalom gathered people around him who were disgruntled with King David,

and he told them that if he, Absalom, were king, they would get what they wanted. That a politician would promise to give people what they want is a familiar scenario to us! Absalom thus built up a following, and finally he launched a full-scale rebellion. We noted previously in this series how the rebel army of Absalom attacked Jerusalem, how David was caught by surprise, and how David was forced to flee the city.

David, along with a small band of compatriots, headed toward the distant town of Mahanaim, which was about a hundred miles east of Jerusalem. The journey there was miserable. David was full of grief and anxiety—we heard in the Scripture how he walked barefoot and covered his head—and he was even tormented along the way. There was a man named Shimei, who was of the family of Saul, who resented David and who now took this opportunity to heap insult onto injury. The book of II Samuel in chapter 16 reports that “Shimei approached and cursed continually, and threw stones at David, and at David’s servants, and shouted, ‘Begone, you worthless fellow! The Lord has avenged all the blood of the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned, and the Lord has now given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom! See, your ruin is upon you.’” (II Samuel 16:5–8) Shimei did all this from a distance, from the far side of a ravine. David’s bodyguards wanted to run over and cut Shimei to pieces. But David told them to let him go.

By the time David arrived at Mahanaim, he was physically and emotionally spent. Then the Scripture from chapter 17, which we heard earlier, reports, “When David came to Mahanaim, Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, and Machir the son of Ammiel from Lodebar, and Barzillai the Gileadite brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds and sheep and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat; for they said, ‘The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness.’” (II Samuel 17:27–29)

At one of the lowest points in David's life, with his enemies pressing upon him, God provided an abundant table. Refreshed and greatly encouraged, David began to build up support, using Mahanaim as a base. We will see next Sunday how the story unfolded from there. But it is clear what specific banquet David had in mind when he wrote, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” At a time when he was feeling deeply betrayed, threatened, and attacked, David received exactly what he needed—caring support and strengthening help.

It is notable also how that help arrived—via a group of caring people. David’s story thus illustrates how we are to be instruments of God’s care and support for others. In this respect, Shobi and Machir and Barzillai form a striking picture of what the church is to be—a community organized to extend help to others. It is interesting that the help they provided was in the form of food, since this is something the church continues to often do! Just yesterday our church provided an abundant table for the needy in Kent, by providing a free lunch through the Lord’s Lunch ministry.

There is another very interesting feature of David’s story in the identities of the people in that caring community. The group bringing food to David’s entourage included

Shobi, who was not a Hebrew but an Ammonite, a member of a neighboring kingdom. The group also included Barzillai, who is identified as a Gileadite, meaning that he was living amongst that Hebrew clan; but Barzillai is not a Hebrew name. It is an Aramaean name, which leads many Biblical scholars to conclude that he also was a non-Israelite, an Aramaean who as a foreigner had joined the Israelite community. So two of the three key people who helped David were not native Israelites. David's entourage itself also included non-Israelites. In the account of David's flight from Jerusalem, there is a story about six hundred Gittites—a non-Israelite group from Philistia—who had recently immigrated to Jerusalem and who chose to stick with David as he fled toward Mahanaim. II Samuel 15 reports that "David said to Ittai the Gittite, 'Why are you also coming with us? Go back, for you are a foreigner, and also an exile from your home. You came only yesterday, and shall I make you now wander about with us? Go back, and may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you.'" (II Samuel 15:19–20) David kindly urged Ittai, the leader of the Gittite group, that they did not need to get caught up in David's troubles. "But Ittai," the Scripture reports, "answered the king, 'As the Lord lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.'" (II Samuel 15:21) The remarkable picture here is that while David's own son is betraying him, Ittai, a foreigner, pledges unshakable allegiance to David; and while David's son wants to take everything away from David, two other foreigners, Barzillai and Shobi, along with the Israelite Machir, step forward to give David generous and critical help. This again provides a foretaste of what the church is to be—a community of every race and nation that joins together in a common commitment to God and God's purposes.

David thus received crucial support from this network of friends; and David in gratitude would later offer to reward them each for their loyalty. At the same time, David was clear that the most important help that he was receiving was the help of God; for it was God who was inspiring people to help David and who was powerfully at work in all that was unfolding and that would continue to unfold. Thus in Psalm 23 David would not finally write, "My friends prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies," but rather he would address God: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." David knew that God was the ultimate source of all blessing; and he knew further that his greatest need, by far, was not for even the nicest earthly banquet of good things but for the grace and strength and promise of God.

Jesus carried this theme forward when he referred to the food that God provided in Old Testament days and said, "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness . . . and they died. I am the living bread which comes down from heaven, that a person may partake of it and not die." (John 6:49,51) Once again, food in the Scripture provides a clear spiritual image. As much as we may value the many material blessings that we receive from God, our deepest need is spiritual—the need for a life-giving connection with God. Jesus is that "living bread"—the gift of God that nourishes the soul.

Today, like David, we may find ourselves at times confronted by numerous troubles

and all sorts of threats; but no matter what “enemies” may surround us, even death, we can find in Jesus Christ that God provides a table that is abundant and everlasting.