

Easter 4, Year C

- We probably need to be careful when we read Psalm 23, just like we probably should with all the different passages that we know really well
- Possible to read Psalm 23, especially along with passages like our reading from John this week of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and think that Christ being our Good Shepherd means a promise that no harm will ever come to us
- That's especially easy if we pick out the parts of Psalm 23 that are the really comforting images, if we focus on the green pastures and the still waters and the table spread in the presence of our enemies
- If we just ignore that part about walking through the valley of the shadow of death
-
- And while it may not be as familiar a story, to most of us, it's possible to do the same thing with our epistle reading from Revelation 7, one of my absolute favorites
- To hear, as we do, about those who have washed their robes clean in the blood of the Lamb – one of, I have to say, the most moving illustrations for thinking about Baptism – and recognizing that by virtue of our Baptism this passage means that we too will someday “hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike [us], nor any scorching heat;”
- This is one of the best promises God offers to us in all of Scripture
- There is deep comfort in the promise that “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” I am deeply moved at the thought that God promises to wipe those tears – our tears – away
- But it isn't a promise that we will never again in this life have cause to cry
-
- Take our story from Acts, for example
- The story of Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, a woman known for good works and acts of charity, known well enough that she was named twice, both in Aramaic and in Greek, probably so that both communities who knew her would be able to recognize her in this story
- What little information we have about her indicates that she was probably quite devoted, probably quite holy, probably quite a difference maker in her community
- And yet, still she died, bringing a great deal of grief to that community
- And yes, Peter comes, and is able to raise her from the dead – is able to bring Resurrection, new life, to that community

- But it's meaningful, I think, that even that community's faith, even Tabitha's seeming holiness and devotion, was not a guarantee of insulation from harm or misfortune
- The guarantee was that God would be there – was there – with them
-
- It makes me think of a scene from the movie Finding Nemo
- There's a moment in the movie when Marlin, a clownfish who is searching for his son Nemo explains that he's desperate to find him because, he says, "I promised I'd never let anything happen to him."
- And Dory, his companion on the journey replies, "Well, that's a funny thing to promise... You can't never let anything happen to him. Then nothing would ever happen to him."
-
- This might seem like a strange thing for me to be saying in the midst of this season of Easter, this season where we're proclaiming Resurrection – but I think it's a pretty important thing to remember, and I'll tell you why:
- We don't want to be unaware that bad things could still happen to us – we don't want to be unprepared, don't want to think that Resurrection and working toward making the Kingdom of God present here and now means that sin and death and evil don't still have some sway over this world
- We don't want to delude ourselves into thinking that nothing bad will ever happen again
- And if something bad does happen, we don't want it to shake our faith to its core, or make us think we've somehow done something to deserve it – we're going to mess up, and bad things will sometimes happen, and those two things are almost never related
- We have to be able to reconcile the reality of misfortune with the love that God has for us
- God loves us, full stop.
- And part of that love is knowing that no matter what happens, sin and evil and death do not have the last word – but that doesn't mean nothing bad will ever happen again
-
- The gift of life that God gives us is staggering in the opportunities it presents us with
- We have the chance to experience the exhilarating highs of unbridled joy, astonishing love, of hope and serenity and awe
- And yes, sometimes we have the lows of anguish, and disappointment, and misery
- God doesn't promise never to let anything happen to us. After all, then nothing would ever happen to us

- But God does make quite a few promises that are every bit as important
- God is with us in the valley of the shadow of death, promising that we need not fear
- God is with us after every great ordeal, promising that all will be made right, and that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes
- And God is with us whenever bad things happen, promising to comfort us and heal us, to revive us and guide us, to set a table for us
- To bring us goodness and mercy, all the days of our lives