

IN THE THIRD PERSON

This sermon is a little different. It has the feel of being a journey,or... better labelled “In process”. Let’s call it a **process sermon**With ...the added bonus of being an interactive exposition. *Perception is important,.... after all, ...and ...* I’m not thinking of current political events.

The interactive exposition part is that **You are invited** to participate in this sermon, too.

Every time I say “Psalm 23” – NOT this time, but every other time you hear it, read in unison, “that Psalm” as printed in the bulletin. I will refer to it as the Shepherd’s Poem, but that’s not the prompt. Okay? Remember the prompt.
So,.... today.... you’ll have to listen carefully.....

In the liturgical calendar, today is called Good Shepherd Sunday.
I thought I’d just toss that tidbit out there.
After all, Perceptions are important.

So,... let’s begin the process.
Our readings, this morning, were from Acts and the book of Revelation.
[Note: it is Revelation and not Revelations]
Both passages are a bit unusual.

The story in Acts 9 is about the restoration of Tabitha.
Tabitha, her Greek friends knew her as Dorcas, or we could call her Gazelle, but we won’t. We’ll use the Aramaic.
Tabitha, had become and ill and died. Peter, who was not far away, was called by the mourners to “come without delay.”
Tabitha was dead long enough to have received the customary burial preparations.
Peter asked to be alone with her, and knelt next to the body and prayed.
He then commanded her to get up, and she was restored to the living.
It was a restoration; a miraculous restoration that touched the lives of many people who heard about it.

This is a wonderful story about the power of God—the power that Christ also had. This episode demonstrated that the early believers/ the NT church was also blessed by God, as Jesus was.
Perceptions are important.

However, this event can prompt many troubling questions that can make us uncomfortable.
Such as, Was this just a New Testament thing – meaning such miracles can’t happen today?.... And, ... if so, then why not? The scriptures do NOT tell us that “super natural” miracles were restricted to the first century, and if they are not, ... then they must be possible today?
*But, do we believe that such things can Happen?
.....And, what would I do if someone called me to restore a daughter back to life, who has been dead for several hours????
Even so, we just don’t seem to witness such miracles these days.... and WHY NOT?

Some of us are thinking.... “oh but they do? I know someone who once witnessed a huge miracle.” Perhaps,..... But they are NOT very frequent, and that sure doesn’t see fair? Or,.... is it a matter of having enough faith, and HOW much faith is enough?

And, is faith a currency that can be earned, stored and cashed in for God’s blessings? And, why would God demand premium prices for those who are hurting the most? These questions are not leading us in a joyful direction,.... so we will let them percolate a while and consider the Revelation text.

This may not be a turn to simpler answers–Revelation has a perception problem, ... and our text in chapter 7 **is** interesting.

In this pericope, John is describing a scene in heaven. A multitude is gathered before God; a multitude representing every nation, every language and every sub group,..... except the illegal immigrants in Arizona. Actually, it states all groups of people are represented, and They were all equal in status. They were all together and they were all dressed the same way, and they were delighted to be there,...together.

Interesting? Does this mean the extra pious and super-generous won’t get front row box seats? And, what about those who paid for first class treatment? Do church pastors get some gold thread in their white robe? ??All together? NO rank and privilege. NO line up?

Well,.....Of course NOT. Line-ups are linear thinking. When Jesus said the first will be last, and the last first, he was likely chuckling to himself.... because he knew there wasn’t going to be any lines. We’re all together! We are all in this together! Revelation even says that. We are all together. The first **is the last and vice versa. How could we think otherwise? ??????

Yet,.... would we be delightedor even JUST content to simply be in the presence of God? Is that all we want?

And, will they serve coffee in heaven?
?????

More hard / tough questions, and when confronted by questions our knee jerk response is to make sense and explain the questions – to sand down the rough spots so that concepts will fit into our pocket.

A lot of people have analysed and simplified Revelation to ashes.

Even thought, we know that Much of Revelation is comfort food for the hurting,.... I really like verse 17. I want to hold on to that part.

“For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and [that shepherd] will guide them to springs of water of life, and.... and... and.....GOD WILL WIPE AWAY EVERY TEAR from their eyes.”

God will wipe away every tear. I like that part/ that message of hope.

As I was caressing that notion, I recalled a conversation I had with dear friends—friends that I’ve known for 40 years.

Ten years ago, they had confronted me with some very tough questions.

It was a month or so after their oldest daughter committed suicide.

She was 25 years old at the time.

When they called me, the shock had subsided and they were flooded with grief—confusion, anger..... and questions.

They had read Psalm 51... where it talks about God sending angels to guard us, and they wanted to know why God didn’t protect their daughter.

And, since they lost one daughter, they wanted to know how they could trust God to protect their other two daughters.

Both were very profound questions..... that they had the right to ask.

When someone is in the midst of grief, it is NOT prudent to attempt to do systematic theology. Even with a cool and calm mind, HOT questions are hard enough to handle.

Grieving parents are in no place to ponder potential and excuses can be abusive.

*Not only is it bad theology, but it is mean to tell a grieving parent that *God needed another angel in heaven* or that the death was God’s will. Those “excuses are ugly and wrong!

God creates and brings life and NOT death and destruction.

My friends did not realize that their first question was really asking a bigger question, which was....., in light of the fact that the world is full of terrible tragedies and sorrows.... where angels seem afraid to tread.. ... their question / their issue really was: “Why did this happen to me?”

“Why did God allow this to happen to me?”

That question is a theological question ... that is difficult to handle in the calm of life.

So, I focussed my response to their second question: “How can we trust God to protect us and our children?”..... or.....in other words, Is there hope?

With the impetus John had when writing Revelation, I reassured them that God was faithful. God did surround their daughter with angels.

**She was NOT overcome by evil. God had been with her for years, through her struggles. She was protected and graciously carried into the presence of the divine.

**Her death was really the final episode of a long battle, not unlike terminal cancer. She was finally overwhelmed by her illness, and not by neglect.

We don’t like to think about death, especially when that thought is connected to our children or other loved ones.

We parents want to protect and heal our children when they are hurting.

And, there are times when all of us want help: healing and hope, too.

Yet, bad things happen, they just happen,... and...there is uncertainty, and that really unnerves most of us.

However, we must realize that this struggle is NOT like trying to solve a math problem, nor is it like working on a cross word puzzle. Figuring things out and having good theology will not give us a “get out of jail” card, but good theology won’t make things worse.

We may face tough times, and bad theology can make things worse.

Moreover, a big part of these questions are about emotions and our perceptions of life, God and each other.

The big questions are about relationships and hope, and there are times we need to be comforted.

That is why the Shepherd’s Poem is so popular.

We read it to give us **the** encouragement and comfort that is much like a parent’s loving hug.

It brings us good feelings and hope, in spite of what the world around us brings our way. The imagery in the Shepherd’s poem produces the perception of being loved and cared for, and that is its purpose.

Perception is important, and speaking of perception: Today’s passages are not intended to make us struggle or feel uncomfortable—quite the opposite.

The story of Peter and Tabitha was NOT intended to bring us a theological challenge, but rather assurance. I think the story was an exciting giggle about the surprise of God.

Peter was NOT asked to perform a miracle. His presence was merely requested, much like a pastor is called to bring comfort and the reminder of God’s providence.

Moreover, the quantity of faith required was NOT mentioned.

Tabitha’s restoration was a surprise – from God through Peter – to grant encouragement and hope for the New Testament church – hope for the people in relationship with God.

Likewise the message is similar in the Revelation text. John is NOT trying to present the details of a visual image of heaven, but instead, He was seeking to grant hope to the church which was then under intense persecution.

In essence, John was saying, “Don’t worry; it will be okay.”

“God will wipe every tear from [your] eyes.”

These days, the church is not the target of organized persecution; however, at times, we do feel the pain of being different – of NOT conforming with our culture. And, there may be occasions we do take a stand against the policies of our government, and that won’t be easy.

Even so, most of our trials and tribulations will be ...personal.

And, there will be lonely, disheartening, and fearful times when we will reach out for comfort,..... when we will turn to scripture and read the familiar Shepherd’s Poem – Psalm 23. { }

That is a soothing passage.

It can sometimes be a mantra for courage and hope; an anthem we call out over and over again for strength and greater spiritual focus.

Yet, what is it about that passage? Is there magic in the words?
Do miracles happen by merely reciting it?
How does it work?
What makes reading Psalm 23 so powerful? { }

Does reading that cause a miracle?

Years ago, when I would scrape my knee, my mother would comfort me and that included giving me a hug and rubbing my knee. Right on top of the sore, she would rub. Now, that didn't make any sense, at the time, but it worked. The pain would go away. It was a miracle, I thought? That was my perception.

Years later, I learned that a nerve can carry three messages, but only one at a time. The messages are: heat, pressure (as in touch) and pain.
And, pressure, such as rubbing a knee, will prevail over minor pain. The rubbing sensation will be sent to the brain and NOT the minor pain.
Rubbing a sore knee really does work, but unfortunately, it just doesn't work as well when we do it ourselves.

Moreover, I think the hug and reassuring words help, too.
In fact, I think the loving comfort and soft hopeful words are essential for healing,..... along with the touch.

The shepherd's poem prompts us to break out of the state of aloneness.
It leads us to perceive God as being with us, watching over and carry for us. It reminds us that we are not alone.
That Psalm helps us clarify and nurture our relationship with God.

A relationship: and it also helps to know that we are not alone with God.

The New Testament church thrived because they were a loving community.
John notes in the Revelation text.... that we are all together.

Much of the Old Testament tells us about God working through persons.... for the sake of the whole – building, nurturing, forming and saving people–the collective. It was always about God's people / a family of God's children... where all are welcomed in.

Somehow we have transformed the community of followers into a collection of individuals.
Christianity has become a individual pursuit – “just me and God.”
Some even use the term “a personal salvation.”

When salvation is about self, when life is about self then the burden is all on self.
When things are going great, then the individual can feel self adulation for doing so well. And, we call that the theology of prosperity.

And, when life is going poorly, then the individual is to blame, and no one else,.... but maybe God, too. We call that aloneness.

My friend, Dr. Oliver-Holder wisely said, faith is personal, but NOT private.

We are in this together, and the healing and hope is in the relationship.
I strongly believe that God is best understood in the third person – in the WE / US.
We need each other more than we realize.

For reasons beyond my understanding, God works through us – through you and me as individuals for and a part of the whole.
Even Jesus repeatedly said, “NOW go out” – be / live with and minister to each other.

The magic / the miracle is in the relationship –with God and each other.
That is why it is so important to love God, each other and ourselves.
The Great Commandment ties us all together.
God brings wholeness, creation, life, and NOT separation, division, destruction and individualism.

Our environment is precious..... because it is part of God... and reflection of all of us.

Our healing and our planet’s salvation depends on us together with God.
God is still doing amazing things..... through you and me.

Let us never neglect our children – all of our children – yours and mine.
We can’t do this parenting thing alone. The world is too dangerous for that myth. We need God and each other.

May we lift each other up in prayer, and always assume the best, even when there is disappointment.

God does send angels to watch over and guard us, and they have faces too, yours and mine. Let us never forget that.

And, in those dark moments of despair, let us remember that we can call upon God’s greatest gift to us—each other.

There is power and healing in tender embracing and the collective pouring out of our souls, as we journey on together.

Actually, I think deep down... we already know this,.... because that is one of the mains reasons....we love to sing together.
Singing reminds us of the magic.... of being together with God.

So,..... one last time, we will say the shepherds Psalm; however, this time.... change the first person pronoun into the third person – using we / us/ our.

In the third person, please Rise and say Psalm 23.