

Quinquagesima 2020

The Transforming Power of God

1 John 2:1-2 and Psalm 23

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"You got your peanut butter on my chocolate!" "You got your chocolate in my peanut butter!" Turns out that these two great tastes went well together and Hershey made a bundle on the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. There is no denying that there are times when combining two distinct components add up to something truly inspiring. I am probably the only priest you will ever know who would use such an analogy to open a sermon on Holy Scripture...but, the Spirit moves as the Spirit moves. And not only have I had a sweet tooth lately but I have also been looking forward to the season of Lent and the reality check that we are all called to engage. If you are one that goes through Lent as one might go through the season of Advent or Trinity then you are doing it wrong and not being honest with yourself. Lent is time to get the world out of your system and let the Holy Spirit engage your soul as only the Holy Spirit can.

Like combining two great flavors to create a new perspective I offer you a combination of St. John and King David to set you forth on your Lenten journeys:

"My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous and He is the propitiation for our sins." 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..."

These are good words...a perfect combination for reflection and insight into our human natures and our need for redemption. Reading these passages together is like experiencing a new beginning, discovering a new reality leading us to desire a fresh start. Lent is a time for us to surrender anew to our advocate; our advocate who will one day be our judge and our advocate who knows the cost of our sins and has already paid the penalty...Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins; He has

appeased God the Father on our behalf...and you are accounted righteous in His sight. Grace and mercy so abundantly given...

"The Lord is my shepherd" David begins his Psalm. Our advocate, Jesus Christ, tends the children of God as a shepherd watches over his sheep. And like sheep we are a wayward bunch when left to our own devices. We are susceptible to wandering, to getting stuck in the fence, to becoming the fodder of an adversary. Without someone to watch over them sheep will eventually succumb to their own wills meeting fates that could have been avoided had they a shepherd to follow. Ezekiel speaks prophetically of Jesus Christ in the person of David when he says *"I shall raise up one Shepherd over them, and He will tend them, even My Servant David. He shall be their Shepherd, and I, the Lord, will be their God"* (Ezekiel 34:23-24). David becomes the prototype of the true shepherd, he is a man after God's own heart, yet full of weakness and worldly failures. We could even say, a man who needs a shepherd himself, a shepherd who could be his advocate and propitiation, a shepherd who could lead the lost and lame to ETERNAL life. Jesus Christ is such a man because Jesus Christ is God Incarnate!

"Most assuredly", the Apostle John tells us in the tenth chapter of his Gospel, *"I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice..."* Our current circumstances are so much like the sheepfold... vulnerable to deceit, defenseless against prevailing adversaries, susceptible to worldly whims disguised as compassion. The thief comes from wherever it is possible for him to hide...he will steal...and he will pervert. But! We have an advocate with the Father! Jesus Christ the Righteous - the Propitiation for our sins! Jesus is the shepherd who has authority to use the door, the entrance whereby he will lead his sheep to pasture. The Father is the doorkeeper who has sent us the shepherd. If you hear his voice you must follow or enter pastures that are empty of the food of eternal life.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." What greener pastures could there be but the hearing of the very word of God? What greener pastures could there be but the continuing guidance of the Ten Commandments? Life becomes so much

simpler when we don't force ourselves to justify our waywardness. God is the same yesterday, today and forever...it is we who change...it is we who argue an untruth until it is accepted. The Bible is outdated, some say. New revelations have proven parts of scripture irrelevant, others contend. We have advanced beyond the need for a god and Christianity is no longer a necessary ingredient of society, popular culture would suggest. There is a spiritual drought in the once fertile places of the earth, but where the Gospel continues to be preached, where the Gospel has taken hold anew, the waters have risen and places once barren are blooming! *"He leadeth me beside the still waters."* There are places, even in the desert, where springs provide for life abundant. No matter where you are the 'still waters' of God's mercy are there to keep you whole. New seeds sprouting to life in the waters of Baptism nurtured and cared for by the Holy Spirit. The refreshing waters of Baptism clear our souls and minds of the burdens propagated by sin. He maketh me to lie down! He prepares a place for us here and now in His eternal kingdom that we may one day be with Him in paradise.

"He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His namesake." In faith we believe and it is our actions in such a faith that we show the evidence of our transformations. We are restored and strengthened by His word, the green pastures, to live lives as living members in the body of Jesus Christ! We choose to walk the paths of righteousness because it is the narrow path, though few choose to follow, where we encounter the lover of our souls...

"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." We can find comfort and safety in God's word and promises. The world offers the shadow of death...the world asks us to climb down into the valley and feast on the refuse of worldliness. But where does our strength come from? Nehemiah 8:10 *Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.* Isaiah 41:10 *So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.* Exodus 15:2 *The Lord is my strength and my song; he has given me victory.*

We may hear the noises of torment all around us, but by remaining steadfast in the safety of prayer we are consoled by the loving spirit of

the Almighty replacing our fears with comfort. It is His rod and staff...His divine protection that allows us to glory in what is considered loss in this world that we may gain Christ and eternal salvation.

Those who 'walk' through the valley are those who find no rest sitting in the shadow of worldliness. The shadow...the devil, tries to blind us to the truth found in Jesus Christ. But we find comfort because the Lord walks before us, lighting our way through the green pastures of His word and covering us with the descending waters of the spirit in our baptisms.

"Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." In the previous Psalm, Psalm 22, the Holy Spirit leads David to encounter Jesus in the tribulation of Crucifixion. A Table of sacrifice being prepared...a Table of Christ crucified and buried...a table of the divine body and blood sacrificed...a table of a RISEN CHRIST and the promise of ETERNAL LIFE! It is the Table of the final sacrifice. We come to share in His sacrifice that we may also share in His resurrection. There is no secret Christian club hiding behind curtains or clandestine rituals. The Gospel is not to be placed under a bushel...it is to be shouted from the rooftops.

We possess a grace to be shared...a love to be begotten...a perfect love that drives out fear. Our cups do runneth over. It is the perfect grace of Christ in us that far exceeds our sinfulness. Those who are strengthened by the Holy Spirit...those who choose Christ over worldly affairs are anointed and unconquerable soldiers in the body of Jesus Christ.

If you are going to be a follower of Jesus Christ then get off the fence and create a wave. Let all the world know who stands as our advocate before the Father and who gave himself for the propitiation for our sins. It would do us justly to represent the words of St. Ignatius in his letter to the Romans; *"It is not that I want merely to be called a Christian, but actually to be one (and) if I prove to be one, then I can have the name."* May this Lent be your turning point in the transformation of your lives...

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.