

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Lord is Our Shepherd: Growing Up”
Dr. John Judson
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Psalms 23; John 14:15-31

. As many of you may, or I suppose may not know, my wife Cindy and I recently took a 6,500 mile road trip from here, to Houston, to Oakland, California, to Colorado and then back home. While there was much to look at along the way, there was also a lot of nothing. Beginning in West Texas and extending across much of New Mexico, Arizona and eastern California there is nothing but flat, scrub brush and cows. And I say this as someone who has lived in West Texas. Knowing this would be the case, we came prepared. We had my phone loaded with music and pod-casts. One of our favorite pod-casts that we listened to was “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me”. On this show listeners call in and try to win prizes. When they call in, they are asked to identify themselves and tell what they do for a living. One of the callers was a young man who had just graduated from college, taken his first job and set up an apartment. He said, “Yes, I am finally an adult.” The host of the show, responded with, “Wow did anyone tell you how much being an adult stinks?” I offer you this morning that insight, that growing up can stink, for two reasons. First, because both of our stories are about growing up. Second, because growing up was difficult for both David and the disciples.

We can see this in the section of the Psalm we are dealing with this morning, “*Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over.*” If we look closely at the language and imagery it offers, what we witness is a shift from the Psalm being from the perspective of a sheep to the perspective of a shepherd. While people have tried to make this portion of the Psalm about sheep, it simply doesn’t work. Instead I would argue that it is an explicit reference to David’s move from being a child and young man often running for his life, a sheep if you will, to becoming the King or shepherd, who was supposed to protect others. The psalm describes the moment when David is forced to grow up and take hold of his responsibilities. Jesus’ words as he and the disciples depart the upper room describe the same thing. Jesus has been with the disciples, protecting, teaching and caring for them as a shepherd cares for their sheep. He understands all too clearly that this time is past and that the disciples must go from being the sheep, taught and fed, to being the shepherds who will care for each other as well as for others.

Both stories are about the difficulty of growing up. Both David and the disciples discovered that being an adult, being the one in charge, was not easy and was often dangerous. David would have to lead his armies against neighboring kingdoms who wanted to enslave his people. He would eventually have to flee Jerusalem because his son, Absalom, wanted to kill him and take his place. The disciples would find themselves persecuted and cast out of society. They would be scorned, mocked and some killed for their faith. They would discover that growing up can stink. Yet, they would each discover that they were not on their own, but that God would go with them, giving them everything they needed to succeed. And the same is true for us, for you see, we are also those who are called to grow up; to leave behind our sheepness and take on our shepherdness; and as we do, we will discover that God gives us what we need to grow up as well.

First, there is protection. *“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”* I have to say that this phrase always bugged me. It didn't seem to make any sense. Why would someone set a feast for another in the presence of that person's enemies? The answer can be found in a tradition not familiar to most of us, and that is when a Bedouin receives someone into their tent to spend the night, they extend their protection around them. In other words when a shepherd finds themselves in trouble, perhaps harassed by other shepherds, or enemies trying to kill the shepherd and take their sheep, there is one who will receive the shepherd into their tent, provide them with food and protect them from their enemies. This is what would happen to David when he is chased by his son, Absalom, who wants to take his life. God watches over and protects David. This is what happens with the disciples, after Jesus' death. God watches over, protects and cares for them, even in the face of their enemies. The same is true for us. God's tent is open wide and we are invited in so that as we make the tough decisions in life that God calls us to make, we are not alone, but we sit at God's table.

Second, there is purpose. *“Thou anointest my head with oil.”* Again, this always seemed to be an odd thing to do. Why would someone pour oil over the head of another? The answer again comes from David's life, when the prophet Samuel finds David, anoints him with oil and declares that he will be the king of Israel. In these events David is given a new purpose. He is no longer to be a sheep, but the shepherd of the people. He must watch over, protect, and care for the nation of Israel. The disciples' moment of anointing will come with the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promises. At that moment the disciples role becomes those who are to carry on the work of Jesus; loving one another and caring for those in need. They are to be the ones feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and giving water to those who thirst. In the same way the Spirit has anointed us all and we have been commissioned to be those who care not only for one another, but for the hungry, thirsty, naked and afraid. We are those who have been anointed with oil.

Third, there is provision. *“My cup runneth over.”* Of the three phrases, this is the one that made the most sense to me. To have one's cup running over meant that there was more than enough and that the enough was generously given. This is what David realized that God was doing for him. God generously gave him everything that he needed. He was given men and women to support him. He was given courage and strength. He was given the ability to out fox his enemies. He had it all. Granted, he squandered much of it. But in the end his cup overflowed to the very end of his life. The same could be said for the early church and for the disciples. Through the gift of the Spirit, they were given enough and more. They were given spiritual gifts that made the church come alive. They were given the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and compassion. They experienced the very presence of God. They were given everything they needed for their mission. The same is true for us. We too have been given the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. We have been given all that we need to be the church of Jesus Christ; to be the people of God who carry out our mission of compassion and care.

I am on a daily devotional from The Society of St. John the Evangelist. This was a line from the devotional on the day I began writing this sermon. *“We may wish to stay in the past, clinging to sticky memories. We may wish to stay in the present. God calls us into the future. Jesus invites us to change, to become more. Jesus grasps us and pulls us on.”* In other words, God calls us to grow up. To grow into our calling as Jesus' followers. But as we do, we can remember that we have been given protection, purpose and provision; that we don't go alone. My challenge to you then this week is to ask yourselves this question. How am I growing up in Christ, this day and every day?