

4 Easter A 2011
May 15, 2011
St. John's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Susan J. Latimer

I had a hard time deciding which passage to preach on this morning. First we have Acts – where we hear of the miraculous community where everything is shared in common, and the people follow a new way of life that includes teaching, fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and prayer. You may remember this as our first Baptismal vow in the BCP.

Then Psalm 23 – a psalm of comfort to people throughout the ages.

And finally, John's Gospel where Jesus tells us he is both the shepherd **and** the gate for the sheep.

Like a menu on which there are too many good choices, I stalled at this point, a decision being difficult.

But then the menu idea led me to reflect on the times when I have ordered several appetizers for dinner, because I can't choose just one - and the dinner turned out to be as nourishing (if a bit more fattening) as just one larger main dish.

So I decided to dip into at least 3 of the 4 readings given to us this morning.

Most of us know the King James Version of the 23rd Psalm by heart. This is the version that most people know, even if they are not Jewish or Christian and so do not have this psalm as a regular part of their worship and devotional life.

A more literal translation of the Hebrew gave me food for thought.

We all know the KJV: “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou are with me”

But what about this translation - more faithful to the Hebrew:
“Though I walk through the valley of *deepest darkness and despair*”
I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

There are more than a few of us at St. John's who have found themselves in that valley at times over the past year since our parish hit the local newspapers and conflict escalated, leading to the Alban consultation.

Anyone who has been at a Vestry meeting in 2011 probably knows what I mean – we don't have to travel far here to enter that valley – the valley of deepest darkness and despair.

It may not **be** the valley of death but it **feels** like death to some -
whether it is the death of a particular dream for our parish
– the death of illusions about our community life and how we really
treat one another
– or the death of hope for a particular kind of future here.

It seems that it has been difficult for us to get completely out of that valley of darkness and despair – for just when it seems we have reached a new place, some new or escalated conflict pulls us right back in.

And so perhaps one thing we need to do, those of us who find ourselves in that place, that valley of darkness, is to say so, to acknowledge that to one another, and to God.

Some of us have been weeping together, lately,
and that is a good and a healing thing.

It seems to me that there is a lot of grieving that needs to happen here at St. John's - whatever the outcome of the processes that we are now in – We need to grieve for all the losses that sometimes seem to mount up like an impassable mountain in front of us.

But we do not do this grieving alone. God is with us –
The Lord is our Shepherd – and though we walk through the valley of deepest darkness and despair we have no need to fear, for God is with us –
God grieves with us - and **only God** can truly comfort us.

If you find yourselves in this valley, for whatever reason, hear these words of comfort.

“The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters; he restores my soul.”

He restores my soul
can also be translated as

God restored / repaired my whole being.

God restored my whole being.

Jesus, the Great Shepherd, and the Gate of Life, promised us this:

“I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly”

St. John’s CAN be the place where we can find this abundant life,
if we focus on God together.

If we are willing to practice the hard art of forgiveness with one another,

If we are willing to be devoted to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship,

to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers,

St. John’s CAN be the place where God can work to restore our whole selves

– even those of us on every side of every divisive issue
who have found ourselves in the valley of deepest darkness and despair.

And so, in my favorite part of the new translation, take heart, because:

“Surely goodness and kindness shall dog me all my life”

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.