



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Table for One”

Psalm 23

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Pale Rider is a 1985 Western produced and directed by Clint Eastwood. The movie is set in a mountain town in California and focuses on a group of prospectors and their families. When the movie opens, their small camp is being invaded by a bunch of horse-riding thugs who work for the local mine owner. After destroying the camp, they shoot a dog belonging to fourteen-year-old Megan Wheeler. In the next scene, as Megan buries her dog in the woods, she recites the 23rd Psalm and adds some commentary of her own.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

But I do want.

“He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul.”

But they killed my dog.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil...”

But I am afraid.

“...for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

But we need a miracle.

“Thy loving kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

If you exist.

“And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

But I'd like to get more out of this life first.

If you don't help us we're all going to die.

Please? Just one miracle? Amen.¹

Megan doesn't quote the whole 23rd psalm. She skips over the line I want to focus on this morning:

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

Megan doesn't have to quote that verse. Because it's really clear that she and her family have enemies. A gang of horse-riding, pistol-shooting enemies. She's in a movie about the Wild West. Of course, she has enemies.

Do we have enemies? We aren't characters in a movie. We live in Ohio. We don't have enemies, right?

¹ *Pale Rider*, 1985.

Let's ponder that for a minute. I think most of us do have enemies. People we have hurt and disappointed. People who have hurt and disappointed us.

Who is your greatest enemy? Who regularly second guesses you? Who is the most likely one to undercut you? Sabotage you? Who is the most likely person to question your value and accomplishments?

For many of us, the answer to that question stares at us in the mirror. For many of us our greatest enemy is ourselves. After all, we know our secrets and vulnerabilities like no one else can. And we judge them more harshly.

We don't need an external enemy when we are so hard on ourselves.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

What if that's a table for one?

Sometimes we are our own worst enemy.

I was a brand new senior pastor. It was my first time in that role. Many things were new to me and I was often overwhelmed. So I jumped at the opportunity to make a hospital visit, a setting in which I felt comfortable and competent. I hadn't met the patient or her daughter but I had carefully written down their names on a piece of paper that was in my pocket. We talked and laughed. I was connecting with the woman and her daughter. The visit was going well. I went to pray.

I started, "Dear God, we know that you are with us in this place. We pray this day for Marjorie." I was interrupted by voice of her daughter, "Her name is Melanie." I apologized and resumed the prayer. My face was burning hot. I felt like an idiot.

After I said "Amen," I apologized again.

For weeks to come, I replayed the scene over and over and over again.

Sometimes, we are our own worst enemy

I'm not alone in that. So often, I interact with people who I know to be gifted and wise and wonderful and then I discover that they see themselves very differently. They are riddled with insecurity. They don't realize how wonderful they are. So many of us are so hard on ourselves.

Sometimes, we are our own worst enemy.

Jesus tells us to love our enemies. How do we do that when the enemy is looking back at us in the mirror?

That's where the rest of the Psalm comes in. When we walk through a valley deep in shadows – perhaps of our own making – God will be with us. But God promises to be with us in those shadows. To never abandon us to our self-doubt and self-absorption. To walk with us.

According to the Psalm, God offers us protection, comfort, and, somewhat surprisingly, abundance. God prepares a meal for us.

We're invited to a feast, a six-course meal. This meal does not belong to you or me – it belongs to God. It's a meal that draws us out of isolation and into communion with God and with one another.

At the table, there is forgiveness. There is grace. There is bread to eat, and a cup overflowing. There is oil being poured out on our heads with such exuberance and abundance it seems shocking. At this meal, we are not competing for table scraps.

At the table we are reminded that goodness and mercy are following us. No, they are doing more than following us. They are pursuing us. Actively, purposefully, God is pursuing us. We convince ourselves that it is our job to summon God. Through prayer. Through worship attendance. Through acts of service. But no summoning is needed. God is already here. We don't summon God. God pursues us.

God pursues us through the shadows of our own making. God pursues us despite our imperfections, our mistakes, our getting the name wrong, our self-blame for things we didn't know, couldn't prevent, can't control. God is pursuing each one of us – pushing us to a bigger table.

This table. I confess that when I arrived here at Broad Street eight years ago, I wasn't all that excited about offering communion every week at the early service. I thought it would get kind of boring. Tedious. The logistics of preparing and serving communion every week – every week – all that juice and bread and gluten-free wafers and finding servers – it sounded daunting. I wasn't all that excited about communion once a week.

I don't know when it happened. Did it take a few months? A year, perhaps? Despite my best intentions, I grew accustomed to having communion every week. More than accustomed. I can't imagine doing without bread and cup at least once every seven days. I know we serve it less often at the later service but I love that every week we have the option to attend the early service and receive communion.

Because at the table, we see each other. We are reminded of the reality of others and the presence of God. It is the best antidote I know for being too focused on our faults and imperfections. The table is the best encouragement I know for letting things go. With regular visits to this table, we are our own worst enemy a little bit less. We become gentler with ourselves and with each other.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup overflows.

I spent part of this past week in a hospital room, with my mother who was having surgery at the Cleveland Clinic. She had a roommate. I learned that her name was Katherine and that she was Catholic, active in her local parish. Sharing a room in the hospital is not an ideal situation. You learn every detail of the other patient's medical situation. I could hear every word of every phone call. Katherine got a phone call Tuesday night. She and the person on the other end talked about many things. I tried to tune her voice out. "Please get off the phone," I thought to myself. I was aching for silence. Then I heard some familiar words.

I heard Katherine say.

The Lord is my Shepherd...

He maketh me ...

He leadeth me...

He restoreth...

I realized that Katherine and the person she was talking to were saying the 23rd Psalm together with each of them taking a phrase in turn. I closed my eyes and quietly said the words with her and the unheard voice on the other end of the phone.

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.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

My cup runneth over. My cup runneth over. Our cup runneth over.

Amen.