

Sermon on Psalm 23

“TOGETHER”

During these next four weeks Pastor Pries and I will be exploring the theme “Together We Grow Peace”. Each Sunday the preacher will explore one of the four words in this theme. And so today I begin this journey with the word, “Together”.

As I began to journey down this path of preaching a topical sermon, I immediately made a list a few of the ways I see the people of Peace together:

- The women quilting on the fourth Thursday of each month.**
- Families, friends, groups of youth who sit together during worship each week.**
- I went to the Pella High School Music Department’s Carnaby Club show last Friday night and I saw a number of Peace families sitting together to watch the show.**
- That same night we had our annual KAPs Lock – In. Many of the youth that attended brought a friend. When I walked in the kitchen Gary Kalkwarf had the kids gathered around a table making homemade pizzas. The kids called it “Happy Gary’s” Pizza. They had a blast making those pizzas with Gary and playing games. Around 6:45 p.m. Nancy and I gathered the kids into the narthex for devotions. As we sat down one of the kids said, Ah, why do we have to do devotions, can’t we just go watch TV.”I read from I John 3:1-7 and related the passage to the movie Narnia, that they were about to watch. I was amazed at how many connections they made between the Gospel and the movie. We sat on the floor for 15 minutes and learned from each other. It was such a wonderful, rich time, the kids were really engaged in the devotions. As we sat on the floor we were definitely “together”.**

And the list could go on for a very long time.

Today is a celebration Sunday. Today we celebrate a milestone in our relocation process, as many of us will make their first visit to the land we’ve purchased to be the new home of Peace Lutheran Church. How consistent with our theme that we will make that journey together.

When Pastor Pries showed me the route we will take to our new site, I thought it was appropriate that our journey will take us past Scholte church, the first location of Peace Lutheran Church.

We have much to celebrate today. For we have accomplished a great many things by working together.

As we looked for a site on which to build, we were blessed to have a number of very talented people working together to analyze the various properties for sale.

After the research was done it was presented to the congregation for approval. Another presentation was prepared for our Synod Council to get their blessing on our relocation. I've heard from more than one member of the synod council, that our presentation was the finest they've ever heard.

Working together we have accomplished so much. So many dedicated volunteers in our education and youth ministries.

And look at all the mission work we do together. Pella Food Shelf. AIDS Orphans. Compassion Child. Free Clinic. Blood Drives. Habitat for Humanity. And the list goes on and on.

We have accomplished so much by working together. But I'm here this morning to remind you that we have not accomplished any of these things on our own.

AFT is another way we are together. Adult Fellowship Together is a small group ministry where the people of Peace meet together to study God's Word, and fellowship. Often these groups become part of the member's support system.

Our AFT group is studying the 23rd Psalm. We are using a book written by Max Lucado entitled, "Traveling Light, Releasing the Burdens You Were Never Intended to Bear." The Promise of Psalm 23.

I spent part of Monday and a great deal of time Tuesday reading and studying. I spent lots of time preparing because today is an important day.

I was planning on preaching on the Gospel, but I've enjoyed learning about the 23rd Psalm so much that I wondered if Max had any wisdom I could borrow for today. Finally I reached chapter 7 which deals with the phrase in Psalm 23, "He restores my soul". And it really hit me where I'm living these days.

Peace has very capable leaders who are working on the logistics of our relocation. But we have a lot of pieces of the puzzle that are still up in the air. How much will we raise through the sale of our property? How much money will be able to raise through our capital campaign? We have lots of things we need and want in our new church home and those involved in the planning continue to have discussions about what are truly needs and what are truly wants. All these questions can be a bit overwhelming at times. Afterall, we've never been through anything like this before.

And so it was that the Spirit led me to chapter 7 of Lucado's book. Max begins with this story:

Imagine yourself in a jungle. A dense jungle. A dark jungle. Your friends convinced you it was time for a once-in-a-lifetime trip, and here you are. You paid the fare. You crossed the ocean. You hired the consultant, er excuse me Jeff, guide and joined the group. And you ventured where you had never ventured before.

Sound interesting? Let's take it a step farther. During your journey, you paused to lace up your boots and when you looked up, no one was near. You took a chance and went to the right; now you're wondering if the others went left. (Or did you go left and they went right?)

Whatever, you are alone. And you have been alone for, well, you don't know how long it has been. Your watch was attached to your backpack, which is in all likelihood now on the shoulder of that nice guy from New Jersey who volunteered to hold it while you tied your boots.

You have a problem. First, you were not made for this place. Drop you in the center of avenues and buildings, and you could sniff your way home. But here in sky – blocking foliage? Here in trail- hiding thickets? You are out of your element. You weren't made for this jungle.

What's worse you aren't equipped. You have no machete. No matches. No flares. No food. You aren't equipped, but now you are trapped – and you haven't a clue how to get out.

Sound like fun to you? Me either. Before moving on, let's pause and ask how you would feel. As you sit on a log (better check for snakes first!) what emotions would you wrestle with?

Fear? Of course.

Anxiety? Off the map.

Anger? I could understand that. You'd like to get your hand on those folks who convinced you to take this trip!

But most of all, what about hopelessness? No idea where to turn.

Who could blame you for burying your face in your hands and thinking, I'll never get out of here. You have no direction, no equipment, no hope.

Freeze frame that emotion for a moment.

Do you know how it feels to be out of your element? Out of ideas and energy? Out of solutions? Can you imagine, how it feels to be out of hope?

If you can, you can relate to many people in this world.

For many people, life is, well, a jungle. Not one filled with trees and beasts. Would that it were so simple. (Pause)

If only our jungles could be cut with a machete. But our jungles are comprised of the thicker thickets of failing health, broken hearts, and empty wallets. Our forests are framed with hospital walls and divorce courts.

The sounds of our jungles aren't the screeching of birds or the roaring of lions, but rather the complaints of those closest to us, and the demands of our bosses. Our predators are our creditors, and the brush that surrounds us is the rush that exhausts us. It's a jungle out there.

And for some, for many, many more people than you'd ever imagine, hope is in short supply.

Hopelessness is an odd bag. Unlike the others we bear, this one isn't full. It's empty, and its emptiness creates the burden.

Not a very pretty picture is it? Let's see if we can brighten it up.

We've imagined the emotions of being lost; can we do the same with being rescued. What would it take to restore your hope? What about a person? Wonderful. But not just any person. You don't need someone equally confused. You need someone who knows the way out.

And from that person you need some vision. Someone to lift your spirits. Someone to look you in the eye and say, "This isn't the end. Don't give up. There's a better place than this. And I'll lead you there."

But above all you need direction. If you have only a person but not renewed vision, all you have is company. If they have a vision, but no direction, you have a dreamer for company. But if you have a person with direction, then you have one who can restore your hope.

Or, to use King David's words, "He restores my soul."

Our Shepherd majors in restoring hope to souls. Whether you're a lost lamb, or a city slicker alone in a deep jungle, everything changes when you're rescuer appears.

Your loneliness diminishes, because you have fellowship.

Your despair decreases, because you have vision.

Your confusion lifts, because you have direction.

The story is told of a man on an African safari deep in the jungle. The guide before him had a machete and was whacking away at the tall weeds and thick underbrush. The traveler, wearied and hot, asked in frustration, “Where are we?” Do you know where you are taking me? Where IS THE PATH!” The seasoned guide stopped and looked back at the man and replied, “I am the path.”

We ask the same questions, don’t we? We ask God, “Where are you taking me (us)? Where is the path?” and He, like the guide doesn’t tell us. Oh, He may give us a hint or two, but that’s all.

If He did, would we understand? Would we comprehend our location? No, like the traveler, we are unacquainted with this jungle. So rather than giving us an answer, Jesus gives us a far greater gift. He gives us Himself.

Please note: You haven’t left the jungle. The trees still eclipse the sky and the thorns still poke at your skin. Animals lurk and reptiles slither. The jungle hasn’t changed – but you have, because you are no longer alone. You are in the company of The Good Shepherd.

Jesus doesn’t give hope by changing the jungle; He restores our hope by giving us Himself.

**Hear His Words, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”
“Lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**

Today as we, the People of Peace journey together, there are challenges before us on the path. But let us take a look back at where we’ve been. We can see that path much clearer. Who has brought us to this point? Jesus, present with us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We need to continue our journey together because Peace is a place that restores peoples hope.

Think of AIDs Orphans and Widows with no hope, until our partnership with Mwanga made it possible for the orphans to get an education and the widows to have food when the fishing is poor at the lake.

Think of our Compassion Children, Hector and Ruth whose lives hold more promise this day because of the offerings of our Sunday School children and High School Youth.

When I arrive here each Tuesday morning for our 6:30 a.m. Bible Study, there is already one van waiting across the street to get food from the food shelf. Peace is a place that restores people's hope.

More than likely, you can think of a time in your own life when you were low on hope and you came to this Holy place and heard about The Good Shepherd, were fed at His table. Or perhaps what you received that day was an encouraging word or the listening ear of a fellow member of Peace as you stood in our less than massive Narthex.

In all of these places, in all of these ways, the Risen Christ has been present among us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

God has plans for our future. God will continue to use us to bring hope to those who have none. So God calls us right now to step out of our comfortable pews and journey together.

Journeying together goes beyond all of us reaching some kind of consensus. Journeying together means we journey with Jesus. He leads us and that is our source of comfort, and above all, our source of hope.

The Lord is Our Shepherd, we shall not be in want.

We can journey together with confidence and joy, because the Lord goes with us.

And for that, thanks be to God!