

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates,
redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
In grass meadows He makes me lie down,
by quiet waters guides me.
My life-breath He brings back.
He leads me on pathways of justice
for His name's sake.
Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow,
I fear no harm,
for You are with me.
Your rod and Your staff -
it is they that console me.
You set out a table before me
in the face of my foes.
You make my head luxuriant with oil,
my cup overflows.
Let only goodness and kindness pursue me
all the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for many long days.

That is the Hebrew scholar Robert Alter's translation of Psalm 23 which we
read together this morning. Most people know something of this psalm,
even if they're not churchgoers; like the Lord's prayer, most people have
heard bits and pieces of it here and there. It is often read at funerals, to
give a sense of comfort, a sense of God's protective presence even in the

face of death. But I think only looking to this psalm as a message of comfort misses its deeper relevance in our lives.

This psalm is written from a place of *discomfort*; the writer has foes; the writer is going through times of life that are filled with darkness; the writer has felt so close to death that it seems the very breath of life has been taken away. And yet, in the midst of this, the writer expresses such a sense of intimacy, of assurance of God's presence. How can this writer be so rooted and grounded in God's grace in the midst of such difficulty?

"God leads me on pathways of justice for the sake of God's name." This verse tells us what the central focus of the writer's life is; the pathway, if you will, that he has chosen to walk. When shadow and death loom over that path, the writer takes comfort in God's guidance; the rod and the staff, those things that help a shepherd direct the sheep where they need to go, will lead to quiet waters. Even in the face of foes, the writer is assured that God will feed and sustain, and gently soothe a life in trouble. The psalm would be incomplete without adversity; the psalm would be beautiful, but really just empty words if it just promised a comfort detached from the hard realities the writer faced. And the writer faced those realities precisely

because the writer had chosen to walk on the pathways of justice for God's sake.

And that is where we find Peter in this morning's reading from Acts. Peter and John have just spent the night in prison after healing a man lame from birth, and then preaching to all who could hear that this was done through the power of the resurrected Jesus. The Temple authorities are not pleased. And you would think that Peter and John might back away from their preaching, as they now find themselves in the same situation that Jesus did: answering for their actions to the high priest. But Peter seems to have found the same connection to God's grace as our psalm writer; Peter stays on the pathway that Jesus has led him, and does exactly what Jesus charged the disciples to do when Jesus appeared to them after the resurrection: Peter witnesses to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, even though doing so threatens his safety and possibly his life. Peter, on the pathway of justice, does not fear; and his boldness utterly confounds the authorities who have arrested him.

The pathways of justice are not safe; the pathways of justice are not comfortable; the pathways of justice are dangerous and full of trouble. The

psalmist ended up with foes; Peter ended up in prison. But the psalmist tells us that the pathways of justice are also the pathways to the quiet waters; the pathways of justice are where God can breathe life-breath into us; the pathways of justice are where we are fed and sustained, and where we can feel the gentle caress of God's touch on our wounded selves. And we will see that Peter leaves this encounter with the authorities, not trembling, but rejoicing.

When Jesus calls us as disciples, Jesus doesn't call us to places of comfort and security. Jesus calls us to walk with humility on paths that will lead us to do justice and love mercy; and sometimes the consequence of being on those paths will bring us into places where darkness, and even death, draw near. Proclaiming the Good News of Jesus' resurrected life runs counter to the way the world is structured and how the world would have us live; the pathway of justice that Jesus walked and asks us to follow will win us foes; and we may find ourselves, to paraphrase John Lewis, in good trouble.

If we are rooted and grounded in God's grace as we follow the pathways of justice for the sake of God, we can witness to God's guidance, God's love, and God's care. When we find ourselves facing foes because we sought to

heal the wrong sort of people, or proclaim that our life and our hope resides in the resurrected life of Jesus and not in power or wealth or any standing we can find within the domination systems created in our world, we will find ourselves fed and sustained by God. In the midst of adversity, we will find the quiet waters and the grass meadows where we can be tended to by God's presence.

That is our challenge as disciples: To witness to Jesus' resurrected life, and follow the pathway where Jesus leads; and, like Peter and John, do so with boldness and without fear. Our challenge is to walk the pathways of justice for God's sake, and in even the darkest times, to rest in God's presence. For God is with us; and the life-breath that God breathes into us promises that we will dwell in God for many long days.