

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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RETURN

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Text of a Sermon preached on the Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 25, 2021

ACTS 4:5-12 | PSALM 23

I JOHN 3:16-24 | JOHN 10:11-18

When God called Israel out of slavery into the desert, the journey ended – or shall we say – paused at the foot of a mountain. At Mt. Sinai, their leader Moses, went up and was given two blueprints for continuing their journey, that is, learning to live with this God who saved them and called them to learn to live with each other.

The first blueprint given are the Ten Commandments, also known as the Torah, or the Law. It can also mean “the Way.” These principles, the boundaries of the good life, were often broken down and summed up into two parts. Love God, and no other, with all your heart, soul, body and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

But equally important, and often forgotten, is that Moses received a second blueprint. He received instructions for the dimensions, materials, contents, and the artisans for building the Temple, the place where God and humans would meet going forward. These are as important as the Ten Commandments. These instructions of where and how to meet with God maintain our identity as God’s people who lift up God’s name, that is, who keep his reputation and pass on the wisdom that keeps us close to the goodness and righteousness that God wills in the world.

The instructions for the Temple were as ingenious and flexible as the ethical instructions of the Law. The Tabernacle could and would go anywhere. And wherever it went provided coordinates for maintaining and renewing our relationship with God.

But also, looked at from our point of view, the Tabernacle in the Tent of Meeting, along with the Mercy Seat and the Bread of Presence, went wherever the people needed to go. Whether settled and prosperous, or in exile and poverty, the people of God know that God wants to meet with us. And we know how to come into his presence.

What strikes me is that all the knowledge that God gave Moses on the mountain were for a people like us, who live in a rapidly changing world. The Ten Words and the various structures that have contained it have always been on the move. As King David’s son Solomon said, I know that you, O Lord, do not live in a house made by human hands, but I will build you one anyway, because at this point in the journey, this is what lifts up your name and reveals your identity to the world.

Until it doesn’t. Until God calls us to move on again. Until the Temple is destroyed and God must send us another architect and builder of something unheard of, of a kingdom of all the nations of the earth.

The intimate power and tragic beauty - and irony - of Psalm 23 is that its author, King David, would never “dwell” in God’s “house.” The story says plainly that he was the shepherd boy who became King, who bought and prepared the land, but because he was a man of war, who had too much blood on his hands, would never build and dwell in God’s promised house.

Sometimes it is frustrating when a translation is so revered, so established that it cannot be dislodged, even though it is plainly wrong. The last line of the Psalm reads, not that I, David, will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, as if for eternity. It plainly reads that, I David, who has gone in and out and kept safe the Ark of the Covenant, find myself pursued by God’s goodness and mercy, and especially upon my return, I find the promise. Emmanuel. God with us.

Jesus became our Good Shepherd when, as he was passing through the valley of the shadow of death, he turned to God and said, not my will be done, but yours. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. Yet... I will lay down my life. I know, I trust that you are with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me. You spread a table before me in the wilderness. My cup is full. My cup runs over. It is finished. On the cross.

And still you pursue me in the grave. And you raise me up to reveal the saving work of divine love. You have restored, rebuilt, re-envisioned God’s house.

Jesus, like us, finds his starting point where the psalm ends. The word translated “dwell” is clearly the word “return.” Jesus returned to God. But he also returned to us. He came back for us. In this mystery, eternity unfolds.

Psalm 23 is pure promise, pure provision, pure trust in a God who is there for every step of any journey we must take. This is the provision we need today, on our journey.

In this endless pandemic, hiding from each other behind masks, and the massive changes brought by disease and social upheaval, wondering whether the future has been canceled, we need to find each other again, as we resolve to return to God’s presence.

True, we need to trust there are paths, the well worn grooves of those gone on before us. And provision. But the only thing that really matters is that we can return – and trust we will find God there. Here.

Return my friends. By all means. Find the right pathways. Rejoice in the still waters. Give thanks for a table spread before you and an overflowing cup. But do not forget to return – from wherever you have gotten to. His arms enfold you, embrace you. The house of the Lord. You will find him there. Even here.