

## LAETARE

“And when they had eaten their fill...”

John 6:12

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.” We know these words, of course, from Psalm 23, a psalm of David. “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters,” etc. What does this have to do with today’s reading from John, the Feeding of the Five Thousand? An LCMS pastor I listen to on the internet recently theorized that everything Jesus says or does is from the Old Testament. In other words, He’s not really coming up with anything new, He’s simply drawing on the Scriptures; and the reason we don’t always recognize it is that we’re just not that familiar with the Old Testament. For example, Jesus tells a couple of parables about vineyards. There’s the one about the workers in the vineyard, where Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”<sup>1</sup> Then, there’s the parable of the tenants, where He says, “There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.”<sup>2</sup> So, does Jesus just like vineyards? Does He merely consider them an especially apt illustration for an agrarian society? Or is He riffing on the prophet Isaiah, who says concerning God’s people Israel,

My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.  
He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it.<sup>3</sup>

It’s an interesting exercise, at least. And while there are some obvious connections between today’s Gospel lesson and Exodus 16, especially that reference to the Passover in verse 4 and all the later material about Jesus being the Bread of life that came down from heaven,<sup>4</sup> it’s all the allusions to Psalm 23 that pique my interest. For instance, it says, “After this Jesus went away to the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 20:1.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 21:33.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 5:1-2.

<sup>4</sup> John 6:22f.

other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following Him.” They weren’t there by accident; He *led* them there to that desolate place *beside still waters*. Lifting up His eyes, then, and seeing the crowd coming toward Him, Jesus says to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?’” He has *compassion* on them; He wishes to feed them, because, as Mark says in his account of this event, “they were like sheep without a shepherd.”<sup>5</sup> They had no one else to take care of them; so, He, the Lord, *became* their shepherd. Once the boy with the five loaves and two fish comes forward, Jesus commands His disciples to *make* the people *sit down*. “There was much *grass* in the place,” John records. Mark even specifies that the pastures were “green.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus then takes the loaves and distributes them. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. And all ate and were *satisfied*. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

Now, when the people saw it, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” They’re referring to a passage in Deuteronomy, where Moses tells the people to look for a prophet like him from among them.<sup>7</sup> And so, for a moment, it appears that they *get* it. They get who Jesus is: one like Moses, who speaks for God, and who will lead them, like he did. But *only* for a moment, because, perceiving that they were about to come and take Him by force and make Him king, Jesus withdraws again to the mountain by Himself. He runs away. He doesn’t *want* to be king. At least, not the king *they’re* looking for, a king who *only* makes them lie down in green pastures and leads them beside the still waters. That’s important. Sheep need to eat. They *need* someone to restore their bodies.

But the psalm doesn’t end there. Jesus came to do so much *more*, and this miracle was meant to be a sign of that. After the feeding of the five thousand in Mark, there’s a humorous exchange between Jesus and His disciples, who had forgotten to bring bread with them. And Jesus says, “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” They think He’s talking about literal bread, which they do not have. And Jesus, aware of this, says to them, “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand?” Don’t you get it? Don’t you remember when I broke

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 6:34.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 6:39.

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 18:15.

the bread for five thousand? How much was left over? “Do you not yet understand?” They don’t. They look at Jesus, and they too see a bread king. A prophet like Moses, but no more.

Do *you* get it? Psalm 23 says, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Not, “I shall not want for bread or for water or for anything else I need to live,” but, “I shall not want.” Period. I shall lack *nothing*. The Lord sees you and has compassion on you who have needs far greater than physical hunger. If that were the extent of your problems, then the cross wouldn’t have been necessary. He wouldn’t have *needed* to sacrifice *His* body to restore yours. “The eyes of all look to You, and You give them their food at the proper time,” we pray in Luther’s mealtime prayer, based on Psalm 145. But the Lord, as your shepherd, restoreth your *soul*. He cares for your *entire* person. And for that, the cross *was* necessary. “The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus *dies* that you might live, not just here in time, but for eternity.

He leads you in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. The large crowd was following Jesus, because they saw the signs that He was doing on the sick. But Jesus didn’t just heal; He also spent much time *teaching* the people, leading them in the “right paths.” He taught them how to live, according to God’s will for us, His human creatures, laid out in the Ten Commandments. “Everyone then who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock,” He says toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>9</sup> But since there is *no* one who does what God in His Law requires, Christ our Lord also leads us in paths of righteousness by fulfilling the Law’s requirements *for* us. He goes first, blazing the trail, winning salvation for sinners and gifting those who believe in Him with His own righteousness. As St. Paul says, quoting the prophet Habakkuk, “The just shall live by faith.”<sup>10</sup>

He has compassion in other ways, too. He justifies us, He forgives our sin, but He also walks *with* us, not leaving us to face our fears alone. The same Lord who can feed five thousand men can also guard and protect us from all evil. “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.” Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, and that’s true even when things seem hopeless.

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<sup>8</sup> John 10:11.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 7:24.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 1:17.

Because He has passed through death, clubbing the devil on His way out, He is with you in the desolate places of the soul. He says, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."<sup>11</sup> You are baptized into Christ. You're a part of His flock. He cares for you. So we confess with the apostle Paul, writing near the end of *his* life, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom."<sup>12</sup>

And what will we find there? A table prepared in the midst of our enemies. A heavenly feast in which they are not invited to partake. Barley loaves and fish are fine, but can you imagine what it'll be like to be made to sit down in the green pastures of Paradise? And not in the back with the second cousins and coworkers, but in a place of *honor*, with oil to anoint your head and a cup so full it runneth over. These are pictures of hospitality, of the great gifts God intends to bestow upon you. *This* is the king He wants to be, not where His subjects force Him to provide things for them, but where *He* invites *them* to move up higher and be exalted in the presence of all.<sup>13</sup>

Can God really provide so much for so many? If it were not so, He would not have told us. But He says, "I go to prepare a place for you," and, "I will come again and will take you to Myself, that where I am you may be also."<sup>14</sup> The large crowd that followed Jesus had to go home eventually. They couldn't stay there. But *we* shall dwell in the house of the Lord *forever*. We already do. This, this Christ-centered community of Scripture, faith, and grace, *is* home. We have a place here at the Lord's Table, Christ is with us in our Baptism into His death, and we are declared righteous for His name's sake in the announcement of sins forgiven.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life. For we are not sheep without a shepherd; the *Lord* is our shepherd, He knows our needs, He is with us, and we shall want for *nothing*.

In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 43:1.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Timothy 4:18.

<sup>13</sup> See Luke 14:7-11.

<sup>14</sup> John 14:2-3.