

August 16th, 2009

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

Love Always Protects

Psalm 23

Pastor Tom Anderson

King David is credited with having written or at least inspired Psalm 23—easily the most well-known poem in all of world literature. This is quite remarkable considering that David is a powerful and wealthy king with a vast military machine at his command. If anyone had a claim to being a self-made man, it was David and yet in this Psalm he gives all the glory to God who as his shepherd guided and directed his every step and as the Divine host provided him with all of his wealth and status. It is refreshing to see someone who has successfully resisted the celebrity syndrome of this world where the successful people of this world bury God in forgetfulness and live in the vain imagination of their own self-importance. David does not delight in himself but in the Lord.

We have been studying the nature of love together and have learned of the patience and kindness of love. In 1 Corinthians 13:7 the Bible says, "...love always protects..." and so our focus this morning is the protection of love. Strangely enough, love is the last place most people look for protection. Most people look for their security in the strangest places: locks, insurance policies, savings accounts, political parties, ideologies, cosmetics, diet and exercise programs, military might, police power and the list goes on. What these items all have in common is that they are—as the label says on a bad pair of shoes—"all man-made materials." But hear the good news this morning: love is the only real security any of us can ever have. The Bible says it in 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear..." God is perfect love. He is the Good Shepherd who can truly protect us. It is to love we must look for protection and security and not to the things of this world. Otherwise in the words of John Calvin the great reformer, we will only enjoy "the sleep of stupidity rather than the repose of faith...having carnal security rather than embracing the providence of God."

But what is it that we need to be protected from? And how does Love protect us?

First on the list of things we need protection of is ourselves. The real dangers in my life are not outside my house trying to get in. The real danger is me. Even one so great as the Apostle Paul admitted as much: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is in my

sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.” (Romans 7:18).

I visited an 18 year old man in the Houghton County jail some years ago. He was in for his third alcohol-related offense. He was a brilliant young engineering student at Michigan Tech on a full scholarship. Sitting in an orange jump suit in a stainless steel room he assured me he was not an alcoholic and he said, “I’m not a religious person, I’m really more of a science guy.” I wanted to tell him we don’t have to chose either/or between science and religion. But more importantly I wanted to say to him, “How’s that working for you?” We are our own worst enemies. We need protection from ourselves.

We need protection from Satan. When the Bible talks about Satan, the Bible is speaking of real spiritual forces of evil in this world whose aim is to steal, kill and destroy. There are evil forces that seek to steal our faith, kill our hopes and destroy love. Jesus teaches us to pray for this protection: “deliver us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:14). It is the nature of evil that it always deceives and overwhelms us. Human beings are defenseless before evil. Satan can be poured out of a bottle or a can, he can be fired from the barrel of a gun; he can become a blinding nationalistic or religious pride. He leads people to send their children out as suicide bombers. He leads men to abandon their marriages and their families. He is the voice of humiliation and despair who constantly seeks to undermine your life.

The story is told of a saintly old woman of whom it was said to her credit that she never said an ill word about anyone. She never gossiped, backbit or spoke evil. One day somebody asked her what she had to say about the devil. She said, “Well, one thing I can say about him is that he is always on the job.” Indeed he is. But hear the good news: Love protects us—so believe in it, practice it, invest yourself in love.

One last thing on my list for you this morning is death. Some years ago, a leading chemistry professor at Michigan Tech died suddenly of a heart attack. He had done ground-breaking research in his field and his papers were published in prestigious journals. He was working on a book to culminate nearly 30 years of data he had gathered. His office was stuffed with books, papers, and computer discs filled with his data and writings. His widow offered it to faculty and grad students. Only a few items went on the first day. A week later his entire life’s work was piled into a portable dumpster outside

his office and wheeled away to the landfill. His colleagues were shocked and profoundly sobered by this. Death will obliterate everyone and every human accomplishment.

Love alone can protect us. Love alone is eternal. The Bible says “Love is as strong as death, its ardor as unyielding as the grave” (Song of Songs 8:6). This power is demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ who is love incarnate.

Psalm 23:6 says, “Surely goodness and love will follow me...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” At first glance this doesn’t sound very encouraging for it seems to be saying that love lags behind us and never catches up. But the Hebrew word for “follows” here has a much more active sense than is rendered in English. The sense is that it actively pursues us. We are the wandering sheep with a propensity to go astray. Love is the Good Shepherd who will leave the ninety-nine to go in pursuit of the one. With God, each of us is a one and his loving pursuit of me is something I can count on.

Love always protects the sheep. They count on it, they invest in it and they live in it. The sheep are those who do not trust in themselves but surrender themselves to the care of the shepherd. The sheep are those who form a flock, a compassionate community of those who are protected by love. In this flock fear is overcome whether we are in green pastures, or the valley of the shadow of death or in the presence of our enemies and until we reach our destination in the house of the Lord forever.