

THE LORD ANOINTS

PSALM 23:5b

When you hear the word “anoint” or “anointing” what comes to mind? You might immediately think of a ministry we offer here on the first Sunday of the month. We offer to anoint people with oil which is a symbol of the Holy Spirit’s power and presence and to pray for their special needs. Anoint. Anointing. It’s not a word we use very often in everyday language, is it? It has a kind of old timey feeling to it - maybe a little weird. I grew up in a southern Pentecostal church where I heard a lot about people who had “the anointing.” It meant a pastor, an evangelist, or a musical soloist who had the ability to move people spiritually in a deeply significant way. If you had “the anointing,” it meant really good, wonderful stuff happened at church when you did whatever God had equipped and gifted you to do! If you were anointed, people got blessed when you sang. Sinners got saved when you gave the invitation. God’s people got energized when you preached the Word. “Oh, now, Brother So-and-So (or Sister So-and-So,) he (she) has got the anointing!” The anointing meant the Holy Spirit did something pretty incredible in and through you.

Anointing has a long history. It originally meant to pour a sweet smelling oil of some kind over someone’s head or entire body. It’s been used for thousands of years as a way to convey health and comfort, as a token of honor, and as a symbol of spiritual consecration. Back in Old Testament times, all the furniture in the Jewish temple was anointed with oil. Leaders such as high priests and kings were anointed with oil. When David – who wrote Psalm 23 - was just a teenager, the prophet, Samuel, anointed him to be king of Israel meaning God had chosen him among all the other people for that purpose and role. In the New Testament, it says of Jesus, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and... he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” (Acts 10:38 NIV) You might be surprised to learn that every follower of Jesus is anointed. It means that you’ve been chosen by God and you’ve been given the Holy Spirit. The Bible says, “But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge....: But the anointing that you received from him abides in you.” (1 Jo. 2:20, 27 ESV)

Today is Palm Sunday – the day Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey and the people shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mt 21:9 NIV) They welcomed Him as King and Messiah. Did you know the title “Messiah” or “Christ” literally means “the anointed one”? So, yes, in one sense, on Palm Sunday Jesus did get the acknowledgement He so richly deserved. But, no, in another sense, He didn’t. The Jewish people wanted a Messiah who would overthrow Rome and return the nation of Israel to its former glory. Their recognition of Jesus as the Anointed One turned out to be both inaccurate and superficial. By the end of that very same week, the same people who had welcomed Jesus with palm branches and shouts of praise were quite willing either to abandon Him completely or shout, “Crucify Him!” And crucify Him, they did. So much for their recognition that Jesus was God’s anointed!

During these weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, we've been reflecting on Psalm 23 verse by verse. What does Psalm 23 have to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus? Psalm 23 compares God to a shepherd and us, His followers, to sheep. But it was Jesus Himself who connected being a shepherd to what He did this very week. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (Jo. 10:11 NLT) Each week we've been reading Psalm 23 from a different English translation. Today, I've chosen The Message which renders this much loved psalm in a unique way. We're going to take a closer look at the second part of verse 5 today. The Message puts it, "You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing," but the New International Version has it as "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." There's that word: "anoint." What does it mean that God or Jesus anoints us? That's what we want to think about today. By the way, some of you really observant types out there might notice that I've skipped the first part of verse 5, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." (Ps. 23:5a NIV) Not to worry! I'm going to share some thoughts with you about that part of the verse at our Good Friday worship service. Again, make this week special and significant by participating in the services that make it significant. What does it mean that God or Jesus, the good Shepherd, anoints us? It certainly means that...

MY SHEPHERD OFFERS ME CONTINUAL HEALING.

Some say that anointing all got started with sheep and shepherds. Sheep can be driven to distraction by insects. Flies – all kinds of flies - just love sheep especially in summertime – warble flies, bot flies, heel flies, nose flies, deer flies, and black flies. Who knew there were so many varieties of flies? Sheep, I guess! Flies like to lay eggs in sheep's noses which turn into tiny, worm-like maggots. That can lead to infestation, inflammation, and even the death of a sheep if the shepherd does nothing about it. Sheep can get so tortured and distracted by bugs that they injure themselves trying to find relief. Ewes can give up milking which means lambs stop growing.

Shepherds learned early on they could use olive oil like an insect repellent to protect their sheep. They poured the oil on the sheep's head which usually isn't covered with thick wool. The oil made the head slippery and insects just slid off. Sometimes shepherds would mix sulfur and other spices into the oil, so its odor became a deterrent to the bugs as well. Oil was also important as a way to promote healing. Sheep are susceptible to all sorts of minor injuries. Rocks in the pastures can cause cuts in their bodies. Thorns can prick and stick. Heat as well as general wear and tear can leave sheep exhausted and run down physically. Attentive, caring shepherds, who inspected their sheep – good shepherds, in other words - applied soothing oil which often prevented infection and promoted healing. They anointed their sheep with oil as often as necessary to make sure today's wound didn't become tomorrow's infection.

"You anoint my head with oil..." (Ps 23:5b NIV) So what does David mean there? Obviously, he doesn't mean it in a literal way. What's the point behind the image or the metaphor? Jesus can heal life's irritations and injuries. Living life is a little like playing football. If you want to play football, you've got to expect some injuries, bruises, and

hurts, right? There's been a lot of concern lately over football players getting concussions and sustaining permanent brain damage. Some professionals have retired in their prime because they don't want to risk serious injury. Some parents no longer want their boys to get into youth football. You can make that choice with football, but not when it comes to living life. If you're alive in this world for any length of time, you must expect some injuries, bruises, and hurts. It just goes with the territory.

We all have irritations in our lives, don't we? They range from small, petty annoyances to major issues that leave us disappointed and bitter. In fact, some very deep disappointments in life begin as little irritations that just get bigger and bigger. You didn't get invited to the party. You don't make the team. You don't get the scholarship. Your boss doesn't notice your hard work. Your spouse says something unkind. They're minor irritations in the grand sweep of life; nevertheless, they irritate and disappoint. A whole bunch of small, untreated disappointments can turn into a whole lot of general bitterness. Jesus offers continual and effective healing of life's routine irritations and injuries. If we let Him – that's the key step - He provides a daily anointing of the Holy Spirit to our minds and hearts that produces inner healing. He gives us the oil of joy to protect us from life's many irritations. He pours out the oil of contentment, when we start to feel sorry for ourselves or compare ourselves to others. He anoints us with peace, when all of life's anxieties, pressures, and stresses cut into our hearts and minds. He rubs in the oil of His love when we feel all alone in the world.

How does it happen? Well, first, in response to my faith. I simply believe that Jesus can and will do what He says He will do. Another psalmist used that sheep imagery again, "Acknowledge that the LORD is God! He made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture." (Ps 100:3 NLT) So, come before your good Shepherd in faith. He loves you. He died for you. He can be trusted. Second, I act on what you know to be true about Him. Ask for the kind of healing He alone can give. The Bible says - and God's people over thousands of years affirm it, "He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds.... Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you." (Ps. 147:3; 1 Pt. 5:7 NLT)

Have you ever heard of national "Get Over It Day"? A man by the name of Jeff Goldblatt started what he hopes will become a movement—"Get Over It Day." The day falls on March 9th, which happens to be midway between Valentine's Day and April Fool's Day. The idea behind "Get Over It Day" is simple: all of us have something – a romantic failure, stressful school or work-related issues, fears and insecurities, embarrassing moments, bad relationships, and so on. "Get Over It Day" motivates people to use sheer will-power and move on - no matter how deep the scars. Goldblatt even has a website that sells "get over it" merchandise and provides helpful hints like, "If you're not sure what you have to get over, just ask your friends what they're tired of hearing you complain about." "Get Over It Day" sounds great, but most of us need God's power to truly heal and move on from past wounds, failures, and regrets. Fortunately, God doesn't just tell us or other wounded people to "get over it." Instead, He offers genuine healing through the Holy Spirit.

How does Jesus, the good Shepherd, provide His healing? Sometimes it comes when you put yourself in the pathway to receive Jesus' healing intentionally. Meaning what? We all know we live in an age of information overload. All that information adds little that's good to your life or mine. Most of it will leave you distracted, upset, sad, and discontented. The sheep's head is the most vulnerable part of the animal. That's the part the insects attack. That's the part that's easily injured. In the same way, your mind is the most vulnerable part of you and me. All kinds of sin, all kinds of evil, all kinds of worthless, unimportant garbage gets into our hearts through our minds. Our information culture contributes little of positive value. What will? Scripture. Prayer. The Bible says that you and I need to allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds intentionally, constantly and regularly. Not just once, but over and over again. The Bible says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Rom. 12:2 NLT) God's Word also says, "Brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.... And the God of peace will be with you." (Ph. 4:8-9 NLT)

There was yet another reason for shepherds to anoint their sheep with oil. Every year during the mating season the rams get into fierce battles with each other over the ewes in the flock. Imagine this scene with me. A ram struts around the pasture, catches the eye of a comely ewe, and says, "I want ewe, baby." But about that time, another ram shows up and says, "This might get ugly. Ewe better move, sweetie." The two rams lower their heads and... boom! A good, old-fashioned head butting breaks out in the pasture. To prevent the rams from getting injured, shepherd anointed the rams' heads and horns with oil. Having been duly lubricated, the rams just kind of glanced off each other rather than crashing into one another and causing injury.

"You anoint my head with oil...." (Ps 23:5b NIV) So what does David mean there? Not only can Jesus heal life's routine irritations and injuries, He can also heal life's personal conflicts. Despite being a man after God's own heart, David was no stranger to deep personal conflicts. He endured and escaped his predecessor's, King Saul, insane attempts to kill him on several occasions. Later on in his life, two of his sons tried to overthrow David and take his place as king of Israel. Some of life's deepest wounds come from butting our heads with other people. Those conflicts can leave us all cut up inside, lonely, angry, and depressed. Deeply and profoundly wounded. The most painful conflicts can occur right in our own homes, or among family members, or even within our church family. I've run into many people over the years who have decided never to darken the door of any church again because of battles between believers.

Being a follower of Jesus doesn't spare you painful personal conflicts. Some of them, yes, but not all. Some might even argue that following Jesus seems to put them at odds with other people more often not less. But here's what the presence of the Holy Spirit can do in your life and mine. He can bring healing. He can cause forgiveness to find its way into and out of your heart even when the people you forgive don't deserve it or want it. He can cause genuine love to spring up in your heart for people who don't

deserve or want your love. He can even help you to find ways to seek peace with people who just seem to enjoy butting heads with you. The Holy Spirit is the One who can make this verse a reality in your life, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Rom. 12:18 NLT) No, the Holy Spirit doesn’t promise to resolve every personal conflict, but He can help you not be the problem! Some of us just need to do what any wounded, worn out sheep does who needs healing. It comes before its shepherd and bows its head. In other words, it just gives up and surrenders itself to the healing touch of the shepherd. You and I need to come before the good Shepherd often as well – probably daily – and receive the healing He gladly provides. What else does this verse teach us about Jesus, our good Shepherd?

MY SHEPHERD OFFERS ME CONTINUAL ABUNDANCE.

The Message puts it like this, “My cup brims with blessing,” while the New International Version has it as, “My cup overflows.” What’s that about? Many times, sheep were brought back to an enclosure of some kind to spend the night. They often arrived terribly thirsty from being out in the sun and the heat all day. Often, a deep well - or some other kind of water source - was right there close to the entrance into the sheepfold. Back in David’s and Jesus’ day, a shepherd might have several stone cups available that he would fill to overflowing with cold water. The task of drawing up the water might well have been a slow, long, tiring process for the shepherd. But that’s what good shepherds did. They made sure their sheep had plenty of water to drink. All they wanted. More than they needed. He provided abundant, overflowing, running over, full to the brim cups of life-giving water for each and every thirsty sheep.

There’s also another possible image in David’s mind. Bible scholars debate whether David changed his primary image here in v. 4-6 from sheep and shepherds to a generous host who entertains His guests lavishly. If that’s the case, anointing with oil would be what a gracious host would do for a tired guest who’s arrived at his home. By the same token, the overflowing cup would be a reference to keeping the guest’s cup of wine full to overflowing at all times. In fact, the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament – it’s called the Septuagint – which Jesus Himself probably knew and read translates this verse, “You anointed my head with oil, and your cup was supremely intoxicating.” (Ps. 23:5b Septuagint) This doesn’t mean God condones getting drunk. For Jewish people, wine symbolized joy. When they received guests, they would intentionally overfill their cups of wine and allow them to run over. By doing this, the guests would know they were welcome to stay as long as they wanted.

Regardless of what image David was thinking of, the point is the same. It reveals God’s character. It tells us, first of all, that the Lord, the good Shepherd, or the Lord, the gracious host, is the greatest giver ever. Giving is just who He is and what He does. Giving is intrinsic to His nature. He lavishes His gifts upon us. The Bible says, “Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father.” (Jam. 1:17 NLT) It also says, “And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.” (Ph. 4:19 NLT) It’s important from time to time just to stop and reflect on God’s gracious goodness,

what He perpetually gives us, and how easy it is for us to forget or overlook His gifts. If we don't remind ourselves, our souls get kind of thin and our cups start to run dry.

What is your cup and mine? What was the point of David's image? The cup is your life and mine and whatever God gives us in this life. David's point is that God offers you and me abundance. In Jesus, the good Shepherd, we have all things. The infinite, eternal God is ours. There is nothing we truly need that He hasn't already supplied. Our lives aren't large enough to contain all the blessings God wants to give us. God is not a miser. He wants to pour out His blessing and provision until it flows over the edges of our lives. Right in the midst of calling Himself the good Shepherd, Jesus said, "I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness." (John 10:10 GNT) Yes, God blesses us with physical stuff – food, clothing, and shelter. Yes, God blesses us with other people – family and friends. But God's greatest blessings – where we really see and experience His abundance - is in the spiritual realm of life. Full forgiveness of our sins past, present, and future. A completely restored relationship with Him through what Jesus accomplished at the cross and empty tomb. The daily gifts of His grace, His joy, His peace, and His love. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit available to us any and every day. An invitation to use us in His mission to bring lost people all over the world - and right across the street - into a relationship with Him. The promise of eternal life and living forever in a new Heaven and a new Earth. God didn't just barely save you and me. He has saved us, is saving us, and will save us – in a full to the brim, overflowing, and exceedingly abundant way.

John Newton, the author of perhaps the greatest hymn in the English language, "Amazing Grace," had a truly amazing life. He was as lost spiritually as a man could be - a slave trader who threw himself on God's mercy and became a pastor. Newton would receive almost unbelievable answers to his prayers because he believed in what he called "large asking." When explaining what he meant, Newton would often cite a legendary story of a man who asked Alexander the Great to give him a huge sum of money in exchange for his daughter's hand in marriage. Alexander agreed, and told the man to request of Alexander's treasurer whatever he wanted. So, the father of the bride went and asked for an enormous amount. The treasurer was startled and said he could not give out that kind of money without a direct order. Going to Alexander, the treasurer argued that even a small fraction of the money requested would more than serve the purpose. "No," replied Alexander, "let him have it all. I like that fellow. He does me honor. He treats me like a king and proves by what he asks that he believes me to be both rich and generous." John Newton believed that we should have that kind of attitude toward the God of the Universe. We should get in the habit of "large asking" when we pray. He wrote another hymn that expressed that view poetically. "Thou art coming to a King, Large petitions with thee bring; For His grace and power are such, None can ever ask too much." My cup brims with blessing. My cup overflows. Is that true of your life? If not, perhaps it's because you've not asked. Or perhaps you haven't asked enough of King Jesus, the good Shepherd.