

For You Are With Me

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
May 12, 2019

- Psalm 23 (New Revised Standard Version)
 - ¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 - ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
 - ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
 - ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.
 - ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
 - ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.
- Matthew 18:12-14 (Good News Translation) ¹²“What do you think a man does who has one hundred sheep and one of them gets lost? He will leave the other ninety-nine grazing on the hillside and go and look for the lost sheep. ¹³When he finds it, I tell you, he feels far happier over this one sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not get lost. ¹⁴In just the same way your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God is my shepherd who is with me always.

Imagine being asked to come up with “The Bible’s Greatest Hits.” What would make your list?

- Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden;
- Noah’s Ark;
- The Ten Commandments (they were so big they even got their own movie);
- How about the Bible verse that’s seen at most televised sporting events – John 3:16 – the verse that begins with “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...;”
- What else? The stories of the Nativity with their angels and shepherds and Wise Men;
- Miracles, like water-into-wine and walking-on-water and on and on...;
- The unique, world-changing story of the Resurrection, obviously.

And without question something on just about everyone’s list would be that well-known and beloved passage from the Book of Psalms, the Twenty-Third Psalm to be precise. The psalm is so familiar to so many that commenting on it may seem unnecessary. “On the other hand, its very familiarity invites the attempt to hear it in a fresh way.”¹

Psalm Twenty-Three has become a unifying expression of collective sorrow and hope. A Bible scholar says that its popularity even beyond religious settings has made the psalm what he calls “an American Secular Icon.” President George W. Bush quoted the psalm when he addressed the nation on September 11, 2001. It was included in the public memorial service of pop star Whitney Houston.² Portions have been quoted in songs by artists ranging from Duke Ellington to Pink Floyd³ and movies as diverse as “Pale Rider” and “Full Metal Jacket” and “Titanic.”⁴ Rabbi and author Harold Kushner has

¹ New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IV. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 767a.

² Mark Roncace, “Psalm 23 as Cultural Icon,” Bible Odyssey at <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/psalm-23-as-cultural-icon> accessed 5/7/2019

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_23 accessed 5/7/2019

⁴ Karl Jacobson, “Through the Pistol Smoke Dimly: Psalm 23 in Contemporary Film and Song” at <https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=796> accessed 5/8/2019

suggested that Psalm Twenty-Three speaks to people regardless of their faith tradition, and even to those who claim to have no religious allegiance.⁵

The Twenty-Third Psalm elicits strong associations – quite different associations. For many Christians, it was the first psalm they ever committed to memory – probably the *only* psalm one memorized. Just hearing those words can transport us back to the Sunday school classrooms of our childhood with their tiny chairs and tables, the aroma of glue and paste, the little offering envelopes.

On the other hand, hearing spoken the familiar phrase “The Lord is my shepherd” can also take our thoughts immediately to remembering the funeral of a beloved relative or dear friend. I was surprised to learn that it’s only been in the last hundred years or so that the Twenty-Third Psalm was commonly used in memorial services.⁶ How did that association between funerals and Psalm Twenty-Three happen?

The King James Version’s familiar English translation of the psalm included the phrase “the valley of the shadow of death.” The modern mind heard that poetic expression “the valley of the shadow of death” and took it literally – assuming it was a reference to death. Actually, Bible scholars today believe that the original Hebrew text is a poetic expression for profound darkness and lostness: not merely being caught in a spiritual or emotional shadow, but being mired in a shadow seemingly as deep and inescapable as if the shadow were cast by death itself. Many conditions in life can have that effect on us: loneliness, depression, chronic illness, grief, a sense of hopelessness – they all can evoke a feeling that one is in a valley of “deep darkness” or “the darkest valley” which is how the psalm is translated today.

When we hear this so-called “Shepherd’s psalm” we may be inclined to imagine it refers to Jesus. While the New Testament does depict Jesus as “the Good Shepherd,” Psalm Twenty-Three was written hundreds of years before God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ. So this psalm was not written about Jesus. Rather, it’s intended to evoke a metaphorical image of God.⁷

An overview of the psalm reveals that in the first part the writer describes God as being like a shepherd to sheep, and in the second part God is described as being like a host to a guest. Let’s look at both themes briefly.

First, God cares for the psalm writer’s needs like a shepherd cares for the flock:

- The psalm mentions “green pastures.” If you’ve visited the Holy Land with me, I think you’ll agree that what they might think of as “green pastures” are nothing like the verdant hills of, say, Amish Country. In most places in the Holy Land flocks have to graze large areas foraging for scrub vegetation. I suppose some areas are a bit more green than others – maybe that’s the ideal that the psalmist envisions.
- The shepherd leads the sheep “beside still waters.” I’ve read that it’s *not* true that sheep will only drink from still, standing water. They’ll drink from a gently flowing stream. But I understand that they have a well-founded instinctive fear of falling into a stream because their water-saturated wool would become so heavy that they wouldn’t be able to climb back onto the riverbank. Recently I saw a YouTube video showing how hard a man in Wales worked to get a waterlogged sheep out of a stream – you can find it under “Sheep Rescue in Wales.”⁸ Now we can understand why the shepherd leads the sheep *beside* – up to – still, calm waters.
- I’ve already talked about “the darkest valley.”
- Then the text mentions a “rod” and a “staff.” These are two objects carried by the shepherd: a [rod or] club to defend against wild animals and a [staff or] long pole to

⁵ Harold Kushner interviewed by Jacki Lyden, “A Psalm as Salve for the Modern World” heard on NPR’s “All Things Considered” December 26, 2004 at <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4244755> accessed 5/8/2019.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_23 accessed 5/7/2019

⁷ Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “Who is my shepherd? (Psalm 23),” *Christian Century*, July 20, 2018, accessed at <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/who-my-shepherd-psalm-23> on 5/7/2019.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJDftlaL5-0>

guide and control the sheep.⁹ (A shepherd probably would also have carried a slingshot.) The psalmist feels secure because the shepherd is prepared to care for him.

- By the way, we tend to picture the shepherds as men and boys since the Bible presents us with figures like Abraham and David who served as shepherds. But studies have revealed that shepherding was “done by girls and young women as well as boys and men of varying ages. Rachel (Genesis 29:9) and Zipporah and her sisters (Exodus 2:16) are two biblical examples of young women who are skilled shepherds.”¹⁰

And what about the metaphor in the second half of the psalm of God as host? The host does just what the shepherd does: provides food, drink, shelter and protection. Note that the psalm shifts from the third to the second person: “*You* prepare a table...” “*you* anoint my head...” which serves to increase our intimacy with God. And despite this psalm seeming to be about the individual (“*I* walk through the valley...” “he makes *me* lie down...” “*my* cup overflows...”), note that it ends with a reference to “the house of the LORD.” As we hear this psalm today in this “house of the LORD,” the psalm reminds us that each individual is part of a community putting our trust in God.

That’s a little insight into the structure and content of this familiar psalm. So what might we take from it besides the comfort of familiarity? Someone has suggested that “we can’t see God as Shepherd if we don’t see ourselves as sheep. When we open our eyes to how much we... rely on God for everything, the more we realize [God’s] provision in our lives.”¹¹

Growing in our faith is more than simply a matter of learning to trust that God will “give us this day our daily bread.” Our faith is built on more than receiving the stuff we need; our faith is built on relationship. “For you are with me,” the psalm asserts.

You, God, are with us. Yes, you are with us in the daily activities of eating and sleeping. And, you are with us when we feel surrounded by the deepest darkness that the pains and struggles of life can inflict upon us. You stand by us when competitors seek to undermine us, when our hopeful resilience is weakened, when our trust in ourselves and in others has been damaged. For you are with us when prospects for prosperity and peace are threatened. For you are with us even when we forget you’re there – when we forget you’re here before us, behind us, beside us, above us, within us.

That’s what we declare in embracing the Twenty-Third Psalm: “For you are with me, Lord.” Psalm Twenty-Three asserts the unshakable truth that God is with us. God is with us. There’s a Hebrew word that means just that, that means “God is with us,” and that Hebrew word is Emmanuel. God chose to make the truth of Emmanuel real for us when God came among us, being born into the tangible physicality of our world in Jesus, God’s Son. In Jesus God entered our world and entered our lives to embody that relationship, that presence with us. God goes with us even in the shadowy valleys. The Lord is not just a good shepherd: each of us can believe that “the Lord’s my shepherd” who is and always will be with us.

[sermons: se20190512; © 2019 Jon M. Fancher]

⁹ Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “Who is my shepherd? (Psalm 23),” *Christian Century*, July 20, 2018, accessed at <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/who-my-shepherd-psalm-23> on 5/7/2019.

¹⁰ Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “Who is my shepherd? (Psalm 23),” *Christian Century*, July 20, 2018, accessed at <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/who-my-shepherd-psalm-23> on 5/7/2019. Rachel would be married to Jacob, and Zipporah would be married to Moses.

¹¹ Christina Patterson, “The Lord is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want (Lessons from Psalms 23),” at <https://www.ibelieve.com/faith/i-shall-not-want-what-psalm-23-teaches-us-about-god-s-sufficiency.html>, accessed 5/7/2019.