

Not About Death But Life

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
April 25, 2021—Fourth Sunday in Eastertide

- Psalm 23 Common English Bible

¹ The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.

² He lets me rest in grassy meadows;
he leads me to restful waters; ³ he keeps me alive.

He guides me in proper paths
for the sake of his good name.

⁴ Even when I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger because you are with me.
Your rod and your staff— they protect me.

⁵ You set a table for me right in front of my enemies.
You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over!

⁶ Yes, goodness and faithful love
will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the Lord's house as long as I live.

- John 10:11-16 Common English Bible

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That's because he isn't the shepherd; the sheep aren't really his. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ He's only a hired hand and the sheep don't matter to him.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd.

This week the suggested readings from the Bible include two passages about shepherds. The last time we heard the Bible talking about shepherds, it probably was because they were "keeping watch over their flocks by night." But today from the Gospel of John we heard Jesus describe himself as caring for humankind as a shepherd cares for the flocks entrusted to him.

And we heard the Twenty-Third Psalm, sometimes called "The Shepherd's Psalm," said to be perhaps the best-known passage in the Bible. Surely those verses are among the most frequently memorized verses in scripture. Can't you imagine that even Jesus himself memorized the Twenty-Third Psalm as he grew up learning the Hebrew scriptures?

Nowadays we may associate the Twenty-Third Psalm with death, because it's so frequently requested to be included in funeral and memorial services. But today I want us to realize that this psalm is not about death; it's about life. I think that will become apparent as we take a walk together through these familiar verses. Let's see what insights might arise as we look again at an old friend: the Twenty-Third Psalm.

One difference is obvious: the words we heard today are a little different from what we may be used to. That's because we heard a modern English translation of the original Hebrew text. Many of us grew up with the widely-popular translation called the Revised Standard Version developed in the 1940s and '50s. Some of you may remember the venerable King James Version; that translation dates way back to the year 1611.

You may ask, Why mess with what we know? Why all these new translations? Two reasons:

- First, developments in biblical and linguistic scholarship are constantly providing better understandings of what the ancient language was trying to communicate. New translations reflect scholarly insights.
- And second, the English we speak today is not the same as the way it was spoken 400 or even 100 years ago. For instance, today we talk about feeling powerful emotions “in our hearts,” but English during the Elizabethan period would describe emotion as being felt “in our bowels.” If we were to read that outdated translation, we might be confused about what the Bible was trying to say.

So new English translations of scripture help us better understand the thoughts behind the words of the Bible’s original Hebrew and Greek texts. The version I’m using today is called the Common English Bible. It was created in the 21st century with English speakers in North American in mind.

To begin, while the psalm is written from the perspective of an individual, the very fact that the writer uses the metaphor of a shepherd presumes that the psalmist is not “going it alone.” After all, a shepherd looks after the whole flock, not just one animal. So the psalmist presumes that God’s care and concern are not just for him but for all who acknowledge the Living God. The psalm talks about “me” and “my,” but we know that God’s care and providence are for you and me as well, for we, too, are part of the shepherd’s “flock.”

The familiar opening phrase is “The Lord is my shepherd.” We don’t realize how startling that phrase is until we know this: in ancient times kings were often described as “the shepherd of their people.” This meant that the people depended on the king to provide for their welfare, indeed their safety. That’s why it’s such a bold assertion when the psalmist declares that his ultimate trust is not in the secular political leader but rather in God: he wrote not “the King is my shepherd” but “the Lord is *my* shepherd.”

One of the first *differences* we notice in this newer translation is that the phrase “I shall not want” has been modified to read “I lack nothing.” In modern times marketers in our consumer-focused culture have become very effective in stoking wants and desires within us. It’s hard to resist; we find ourselves “wanting” this or that, all manner of stuff. But the psalmist asserts that, with God as his shepherd caretaker, he has what he needs—he lacks nothing. The psalmist then explains how he can declare that he lacks nothing: because he trusts in God to be his shepherd, the psalmist rests in grassy meadows, the source of abundant food; he’s taken to calm waters, places where he can drink safely. With food and drink, God the shepherd keeps him alive.

Later the psalm addresses God directly, re-emphasizing God’s assurance to provide: “*You* set a table for me... *you* bathe my head in oil” as a sign of hospitality and respect... because of *you* my cup is so full it spills over!” The psalm writer can’t say enough about God’s generosity in blessing every aspect of his life.

Maybe the most famous image in the psalm is found in the fourth verse that reads, “Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger....” An older translation famously painted the ominous, threatening image of a person finding themselves having to walk through “the valley of the shadow of death.”

I appreciate the honesty of this psalm. Even for people who claim to trust God, life can be tough at times. Life is not without its threats, dark times, times when we don’t see the way out. We feel like life has delivered us to a dark place, a place we didn’t want to go, a place we’re not sure *how* or *if* we’ll be able to escape.

A Lutheran seminary professor told a story about finding the way through darkness. He and his young son were riding on a bike path:

Just off the path was a drainage tunnel which ran under the interstate highway. We decided to explore it. We parked our bikes and began to walk through the tunnel. It was made of concrete, wide enough for us to walk side by side, but not high enough for me to stand up straight. We walked for a distance and then the tunnel took a sharp turn and suddenly it became dark. A [little] hand reached out and took mine. Neither of us said anything about it, but we continued, hand in hand, until we came to another turn and we could see the light. Then [my son's] hand let go.

[The seminary professor later compared] that experience with Psalm 23. He said, "This is a psalm for those times when the path of our life takes a sharp turn and leads through the darkness. There is no hint that we can avoid the dark valley by taking a detour around it. The path will have to be traveled. But there is a promise that we will never have to go through the darkness alone. Like a good shepherd who cares for the sheep, like a loving parent who holds the hand of a child, the Lord promises to be with us on that way through the darkness."¹

And by the way... notice in this verse is that it asserts that we walk through those valleys of deep darkness in our lives. We don't stay there. Perhaps that's what makes this psalm so comforting at funerals. It affirms that our beloved has passed *through* life's portal called "death" and has emerged in the brilliant blessing of union with the Risen Christ. What's more, it promises that we who find ourselves in the dark valley of grief will, in time, slowly emerge from the shadows to find the dawn of new hope. Our lives may bring us to valleys of deep darkness, but we will make our way through them.

Perhaps Isaiah had this image in mind when he wrote the hopeful verse, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined."²

The psalmist then mentions two tools of a shepherd that aren't exactly familiar to us: a rod and a staff. A staff is a long pole with one end formed into a crook to be able to pull a wayward lamb out of brambles or away from a swift-flowing current. As the sheep meander in the shepherd's intended direction, the gentle taps of the shepherd's staff on their side or hindquarters are comforting reminders of the shepherd's presence, constantly monitoring their path.

And a "rod" was a walking stick that functioned more as a club – used to scare away hungry predators. The shepherd's ability to wield those two tools of the trade reassured the psalmist that the shepherd was always looking out for his safety and well-being.

Finally, what about that verse "You set a table for me right in front of my enemies"? Perhaps it refers to the ancient Middle East's cultural expectation that you would take in a person who was in danger, offering them hospitality and safety while creating a time for their enemies to have the chance to cool off. Or maybe that verse suggests the unimaginable hospitality of a king inviting a commoner to sit at table in the royal banquet hall. Surely the psalm writer is asserting that we're not left to our own devices in those times of trouble that we're bound to encounter. God continues to provide us a way through the troubles.

So do you see that this psalm is not merely a comfort to those grieving death? It's an affirmation of the blessing we have because we can trust God to be with us, we can trust God to

¹ James Limburg in *Psalms for Sojourners: Strength and Hope for Today From the Treasury of Old Testament Prayer*, quoted in Illustrations on Psalm 23 at <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/search?keywords=psalm+23&bookId=&topicId=&searchType=6> accessed 4/20/2021

² Isaiah 9:2 NRSV

provide for us, we can trust God to guide us even when life steers us through the darkest valleys.

The psalmist declares that God does all this for all of us as a shepherd cares for his flock. What's more, in the person of Jesus we now see embodied in flesh the image of the Lord as shepherd. Jesus declared as much, announcing according to John's gospel, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me...."³

The Twenty-Third Psalm is a short, simple yet eloquent declaration of the psalm writer's trust in God – a trust that he invites us to embrace, too.

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³ John 10:14 CEB