

# Guard & Guide

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
May 15, 2022—Fifth Sunday in Eastertide

## Psalm 23 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup>He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup>he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup>Surely 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.

The Twenty-Third Psalm. One of the most familiar, most beloved passages in the Bible. It has been the inspiration of artwork from catacomb paintings in antiquity to stained glass windows to the metal sculpture on the exterior of our sanctuary. The Twenty-Third Psalm. You may have memorized it as a child. You are probably best acquainted with it from the number of times you've heard it read or recited it at funerals. This week it made me think of the Secret Service... yes, those security folks in dark suits and sunglasses who talk into wrist radios. I'll come back to that in a moment.

But first, let me ask, Who guards or guides you? Who determines where you go, what you do, what happens to you? At first glance you probably say, "Well, I decide for myself. I choose what I do. I decide where I go." Yes. But maybe not as much as you imagine. Others may have more influence on you than you realize.

For instance, parents obviously guide and guard their children, but others play a role in that, too: teachers, of course. Coaches and directors and advisors. Grandparents, maybe older siblings. Ministers, perhaps. Also, parents may find that *their* self-determination is not as complete as they imagined. For instance, if you're caring for an aging parent, that duty puts constraints on what you can do and where you can go.

Who else can guide and guard you, impacting what you do? The expectations and requirements of your job. Employers certainly provide people with certain benefits and protections, but the employer's expectations may also shape how you structure your day, how you distinguish when you're on your own time and when you're on "company time." An employer may guide you in deciding where you live, and that can have the effect of determining how much time you have available for non-work-related activities.

For an employee starting a new job— who guides and guards them? They would be reliant on the person who hired them, or perhaps a direct supervisor in their area of work, or maybe a colleague who remembers what it's like to be overwhelmed in the new position and takes the new hire under their wing. That's who would guard and guide the new hire.

When it comes to guiding and guarding people, no one's better known for that than the United States Secret Service. We all know that American presidents have lots of aides and advisers, of course, but apparently the Secret Service agents on the Presidential Detail have a great deal of control over the president: where can he walk, who can he shake hands with, where can he grab a snack – all in the name of safety and protection. The agents assigned to the Presidential Detail guard and guide the person who occupies the Oval Office.

Similarly, entertainment celebrities, business tycoons, even the most elite professional athletes have restrictions imposed on them by their agents looking to protect their financial worth and bodyguards responsible for the celebrity's physical safety. Those "handlers" have tremendous influence as they guide and guard the celebrities they work for.

I bring these examples to mind to illustrate the difference between now and ancient times. In the ages when the Bible was written everyone knew that it was the queen or king or emperor who guided and guarded you. The ruler's judgment or whim guided how hard you had to work day-by-day to provide for your family while also supporting the royal treasury. In return, the monarch would bear responsibility for safeguarding your life against itinerant thieves or invading armies. It was the king who guided what you did in your daily life and guarded your wellbeing in the kingdom. Because of this benevolent oversight, "In the ancient world, kings were known as shepherds of their people."<sup>1</sup> We'll come back to that in a moment.

The Twenty-Third Psalm's metaphor of a shepherd evokes imagery of a calming, pastoral scene, with cute, cuddly sheep traipsing over a hillside or resting in the cool shade of a leafy tree. The psalmist describes it vividly and succinctly in just six verses. Let's take a closer look at a few of them:

- **<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures** meaning he provides a source of food – fields for grazing.
- **he leads me beside still waters;** I've heard it said that sheep won't drink from fast-moving waters; I don't know if that's true, but I know that it's risky. I remember seeing a video of some hikers in Scotland struggling mightily to help a sheep that had fallen into a swift-flowing stream and because of the weight of its waterlogged wool it couldn't get itself out. Calm, still waters would provide a measure of safety as the sheep comes to drink.
- **He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.** A good shepherd's reputation is built on knowing how to lead the sheep in the right places where they are safest and well provided for.
- **<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.** In everyday life there are always threats to one's well-being – maybe circumstances that threaten one's health or financial stability or physical safety – but under the guidance and guardianship of the good shepherd, one can face threats without fear. The "rod"

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<sup>1</sup> New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IV. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, 767

may have been a club to ward off predatory animals, and the “staff” would have been used to prod and guide reluctant sheep. Those tools of the shepherd’s trade would be a source of reassurance in times of uncertainty or danger.

Note one other thing in this part of the psalm. The psalmist switches from talking *about* the shepherd to talking *to* the shepherd: “...for *you* are with me.” This draws us in, making this relationship with the shepherd even more intimate, more personal.

- **<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. <sup>6</sup> Surely 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.** With these verses the psalmist changes the metaphor to that of a host at table, but “The gracious host does for the guest exactly what the shepherd did for the sheep – provides food (‘You prepare a table’), drink (‘my cup overflows’), and shelter/protection...” (dwelling in the house of the Lord).<sup>2</sup> Also,

But before this psalm ever praises the role of the shepherd or even a gracious host, this psalm makes a bold, faith-inspired assertion. Remember when I said that in ancient times kings were known as “the shepherd of their people”? Look here: the psalmist doesn’t say, “The king is my shepherd....” No, he declares, **“The Lord is my shepherd....”** The psalmist is proclaiming, “My source of guidance, my provider of security and peace, the one who provides for my daily needs is the Lord, God of Heaven and Earth.”

So before this psalm ever became a comforting assurance to grieving families, it was a declaration of faith. And then

The earliest Christians said, “The Lord is my shepherd” and understood Lord to be also the title of Jesus. In John 10:11, Jesus says directly, “I am the good shepherd.” [In 1 Peter 2:25] they found him to be “shepherd and guardian” of their souls.... In the Christian rereading of the psalm, Jesus, as the shepherd..., is the one who restores our souls, leads us in the paths of righteousness, accompanies us through danger, spreads the holy supper before us in the presence of sin and death, and pursues us in his gracious love all the days of our lives.<sup>3</sup>

So let’s realize this: the Twenty-Third Psalm is not only a source of familiar, comforting assurance. Every time we say the words of the Twenty-Third Psalm we are making a bold declaration of faith: first and foremost, we depend on God the Heavenly Father of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ to guide and guard us in our daily walk.

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<sup>2</sup> *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IV.* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, 768

<sup>3</sup> James L. Mays, *Interpretation – a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Psalms.* Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994, 119