

April 17, 2016
Psalm 23
“Listening to Shepherd”

A man who absolutely hated his wife’s cat decided to get rid of him one day. He drove the cat 20 blocks from his home and left him at the park. As the man arrived home, the cat was walking up the driveway.

The next day, the man drove the cat 40 blocks away. He put the creature out and headed home. Driving back up his driveway, there was the cat!

The man kept taking the cat farther and farther away, yet the cat would always beat him home. At last, the man decided to drive a few miles away. He turned right, then left, past a bridge, then took more turns until he reached what he thought was a safe distance from his home and left the cat there.

Hours later, the man called home to his wife: “Jen, is the cat there?” “Yes,” the wife answered. “Why do you ask?” Frustrated, the man said, “Put him on the phone. I’m lost, and I need directions!”

You know in life we all need some directions – guidance – from time to time. Whether it is in a time we feel lost or a decision we need to make or wondering where to turn or needing advice – there are those time when we need to know the way to go, how to get home – to a place of peace. And there are many voices we could turn to – friends, co-workers, neighbors, spouses, professionals of all sorts – to name a few. But this morning I want to urge us to listen to the voice older than all others - that voice that has spoken since the beginning of time to offers us life, offers us grace, offers us direction and leads us in that way we should go. The

way to grace and endless hope. The voice found in our great shepherd. The voice of God that speaks in many ways.

There are so many scriptures that speak to us and touch our souls. But the six verses of Psalm 23 are the best loved and best known of any in the Bible. The 23rd Psalm is like an old friend who visits us bringing warmth and comfort into our hearts. In my mind's eye, I can still see that faded pastel print from my first-grade Sunday school classroom – the gentle Shepherd, with the kind eyes and the little lamb draped across His shoulders, the words printed across the bottom, "The Lord is my shepherd." It is a psalm of how God is constantly leading and guiding us throughout our lives and our days. It is a psalm for daily living.

And so when we hear the opening words – “The Lord is my Shepherd” we think of the author of this psalm which we attribute to King David, for these words were certainly true for him. David is one of those biblical people that is a very real person. We see David as a faithful young man, a shepherd tending his flock – protecting his flock with his own life. We see this young boy face the giant goliath with only his faith to hold him up and win. Move into the palace to help King Saul who is losing his sanity and in time turns on him and pursues David relentlessly trying to kill him. We see David grow comfortable and lose his way as he has an affair with a married woman and orchestrates the death of her husband only to be caught and brought to account by the prophet Nathan for violating God's law. We see as a result of David's sin, his own son's lead a rebellion against him. David lived a life with twists and turns and through it all, even when he didn't realize it, he was like a sheep in the care of a greater shepherd. And so as he wrote those words, “The Lord is my Shepherd” he is returning to his

roots to reminds us that we are all part of a greater flock under the care and love of our gentle shepherd who we put our trust and hope in. And so we hear these words -

“He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” So restful, so reassuring. We are led to places green with possibility, whether it is in body or mind, for our heart or soul, whether we see it with our eyes or sense it with our whole being. The Lord does not call us to barrenness and stagnation, but of growth. As we our reminded of the path. For David knew this path well because he spent his days walking with God and he also knew when he had strayed from the path and that the Lord as his shepherd did not let him wander. And so he writes of a path of righteousness, a path of grace, a path of repentance and forgiveness, a path of healing. The paths of life we are called to daily choose, daily walk down, daily live out in our lives as we grow in our faith and put out faith into practice.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and they staff they comfort me.” James Limburg, author and speaker, tells of going bicycling with his son. “We took a ride on the bike path around our town. 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 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.

We all know of those times when the path of our life takes a sharp turn and leads through the darkness. Whatever that darkness is for us. Our faith never promises us a detour around it. But we can rest and trust in the 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 and out the other side into a new light and a new day.

“Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.” In the days of David there were very strict rules of conduct and hospitality that were followed. If I were being pursued by my enemies, and came to your camp, you would have to welcome me, and you would have to keep me for two nights and a day. The enemy would have to wait for me outside the circle cast by the firelight of your fire. Imagine that.

An enemy would have to be patiently waiting. In the midst of waiting, perhaps anger and rage would turn to frustration. Perhaps frustration would change into tiredness. Both parties would pause and there would be time for reflection and even a change of heart. And maybe the enemy could become a friend, and be welcomed to dinner.

And so this psalm speaks to transformation and blessing and abundance that can change hearts and lives. That we walk through those dark valleys but we are called to a time where we pause. A time God gives us to rest and open our eyes and hearts to recognize how our cup runneth over, how the blessings of life are still all around us. A time to be in our grateful center knowing that God is caring for us every step of the way.

“Surley goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the lord for ever.”

I have heard Psalm 23 and read this psalm in many different situations. In hospital rooms, in waiting rooms, in classrooms, during funeral services, but the most unique was at a camp. During one of my times at the Board of Ordained Ministry meetings which are held at Pine Lake Camp, there was another group meeting there. This was a group of young adult men who came from some rough backgrounds. All of them came from homes of abuse and violence and they had made some bad decisions in life. And there is a church with a ministry of identifying and reaching out these men to intervene and help them make some better choices. They bring these young men out for several weeks to the woods and nature, some of them never having seen a camp or been in nature like this before, to compassionately and prayerfully try to open their eyes and hearts to new possibilities. So, nearing the end of their time at the camp I was asked if would take a little bit of time from my meeting and lead a short devotion, which I was happy to do. So, I led it and then sat back to watch as the leader of groups began to talk with them about choosing a different path away from the pain and anger and praying for them to follow that path. Many of them were emotional as they talked about their hurt, about their friends they had lost to violence, the things they had seen which no one that young should see. And then one young man took out this crumpled up piece of paper that he said his grandma had given him, it was crumpled because he had at first thrown it away and took out of the garbage, and now wanted to read it. So, he began very soft and haltingly, “The lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He resoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake” and then

some more people began to whisper “Ye though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” And then more voices followed “Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” And then as he said those final words he simply said – as the room grew quiet - trying not to cry, that the house he grew up was nothing but pain and if there was any hope of another house, another life with goodness and mercy, another chance he would take it. And in that room, I saw a group of men connected to something greater to know that hope is still there, by these words that captured their hearts saying the worst things is never the last thing.

When I think about why this psalm, why these 6 verses are so popular I think back to that time in a camp where a young man read these words and an entire room was moved. Moved to see that there was a presence greater than them. Greater than their pain. A presence that could take their anger and regret, their journey through the dark valley and give them what they needed most – hope. That they are like lambs, lost and scared like some of us at times, being scooped into the arms of our lord, our gentle and good shepherd who we can trust at all times with every part of our lives.

And that’s why this psalm has worked it’s way into our culture and why people turn to it for comfort – for guidance because as we read these six simple verses we feel the touch of the divine in our lives, our hearts are opened and we are reminded that in this world of bombings, and shootings, and fear and anxiety that none of this is the last word.

In the midst of this - we are called this day to put our trust in Jesus, our Good Shepherd, who offers us and leads us in a different way, in the midst of any fear or trouble. We are called to hear his voice as our Gospel lesson says to us, "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out ... I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep"

And so let us hear our name being called this day as this Psalm calls us to daily put Christ in the center of our hearts and lives. In John 15:4, he says to us: "Make your home in me, as I make my home in you."

In making him our home, we find our grateful center. As we unpack the boxes and settle in, we move from the clutches of fear to the liberated joy of gratitude and peace. When we do this we realize that, as God loves us and leads us to green pastures and still waters we are to do the same in our communities. For as comforting as Psalm 23 may be it is also a call to action.

I invite us all this day to let the words of this psalm soak into our souls and lead us and renew us. Let us hear these words and come to the still waters to nurture our spirit daily in prayer, in reading our bible, in caring for others. Let us find time to be quiet as we take time by the still waters – [tune old radio to hear God's voice - of love – grace - forgiveness - scripture, prayer, meditation, study, worship, fellowship with other Christians] Let us walk the path knowing there is hope on the other side and take time to let God work on our hearts and lives. Let us realize that in those dark valleys we are not alone and that we are called to walk with others, and be the light pushing back the darkness of this world as we let our goodness and mercy runneth over. And as we grasp the hand of the shepherd who is straining for ours and in his arms find hope and peace – as we are led home. For the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my

soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. O good shepherd come and lead us for we need your strength from day to day. Amen.