

A Psalm for All Seasons

Psalm 23

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on April 17, 2016]

I

How pleasant it is to come to church this morning and encounter an old friend.

Sometimes Sunday worship can be a disconcerting experience.

You no sooner get settled into your pew when you are hit with—
a hymn you've never sung,
an obscure biblical passage,
or a strange new idea,
imposed on you and the rest of the congregation by a pushy preacher.

Not today.

Today we look to an old friend—
the best known, best loved of all the Psalms,
the 23rd Psalm.

I cannot remember a time when I did not know this psalm. Can you?

Even if you know no other scripture by heart
or can't find a particular verse if your life depended on it,
you know these six verses,
described by one preacher as
"the six longest short verses in the Bible."

The danger in preaching on the 23rd Psalm is that it is too familiar.

This familiarity is both a blessing and a curse.

While many people can recite the 23rd Psalm from memory,
and people the world over treasure its words and imagery,

the irony is that most of us have never seen a real shepherd
or have any first-hand knowledge of the sheep they tend.

Most of the time preachers read the 23rd Psalm at funerals,
and even folks who can't quote another single verse of the Bible from
memory are able somehow to muddle through it.

How can that be?

Well, think for a moment about why we read it at funerals and why, for that
matter, it holds such an important place in our collective consciousness.

Because it's comforting, certainly.

Because it promises God's providence and presence.

And because it promises God's protection,
even in the face of death and enemies.

So for all these reasons it's a great psalm for a funeral.

And, I would argue, *it's an even better psalm for our daily lives before our
funerals!*

So on this beautiful spring day let us come to this old friend with open hearts and
minds so that we might experience anew what it means that...

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

II

The genius of the 23rd Psalm is that it presents a balance.

It recognizes that life is a tapestry of bright and dark colors.

There is joy and sorrow,
occasional victory and frequent defeat,
and the blending together of these various elements
is what gives life its texture and color.

In real life, green pastures and dark valleys lie side by side.

Joy and sadness are often intertwined.

The Jewish wedding service has the bride and groom break a wine glass under their feet to remind them that in the midst of joy there is sorrow.

When a Jesuit priest dies, his brothers have a celebration after the funeral Mass to remind them that in the midst of sorrow there is joy.

Life very seldom runs all one way or all the other.

Most of us waver back and forth between the green pastures and the dark valleys.

Singer/songwriter Roseanne Cash suffered the deaths of her mother Vivian, her step-mother June Carter Cash, and her father Johnny Cash all in a two year span.

A song from her album “Black Cadillac” expresses this reality:

*God is in the roses
The petals and the thorns
Storms out on the oceans
The souls who will be born
And every drop of rain that falls
Falls for those who mourn
God is in the roses and the thorns*

The power of the 23rd Psalm is its reminder that God is to be found in both the roses and the thorns.

God is just as much needed and present in the green pastures and beside the still waters as in the valley of the shadow of death.

The Lord is our Shepherd and in him our every need is met.

The Hebrew verb *haser*,
translated in the NRSV as “want,”
is the same verb found in Deuteronomy 2:7,

“Surely the Lord your God has blessed you in all your undertakings; he

knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.”

Nehemiah 9:21 has a similar reference with the same verb:

“Forty years you sustained them in the wildness so that they lacked nothing.”

Notice what these two passages along with the 23rd Psalm are saying to us:

God took care of the children of Israel as they wandered through the desert.

To be sure, life wasn’t always easy—but it *was* life.

Those forty years might have seen a lot of grumbling and complaining,
but they also saw manna from heaven,
the birth of a new generation,
and eventual progress toward the Promised Land.

God took care of a wandering people and they *lacked nothing*.

The benefits of the relationship are clear:

have faith in the God who shepherds you through the wilderness,
for the history of God’s people tells you that this God will not let you
lack for anything you need.

This God will lead you to the Promised Land,
provide you with green pastures (food),
still waters (drink),
and a straight path (protection).

This remarkable recognition makes the 23rd Psalm a Psalm for all Seasons.

III

So the psalmist reminds us that **God is with us in the seasons of joy!**

Think for a moment about how the 23rd Psalm would sound if it were rewritten,
if it sounded like this:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil for thou art with me.
 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.
 Surely I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

Would it be so popular if it concentrated on the dark valleys of life,
 with the green pastures and still waters deleted? **No.**

Part of the sheer genius of the 23rd Psalm
 is that it confronts us with the joys of life
 and reminds us that God is there too.

Acknowledge these good times, it says,
 celebrate them,
 and find God in them.

Notice the curious phrase in verse 2—

“He makes me lie down in green pastures.”

Why would God have to make me lie down in green pastures?

Is it because of my tendency to gallop right through them without even
 recognizing them?

Do you find yourself doing that?

Do the happiest times of your life move by unnoticed because you are off on some
 quest that blinds you to the present moment?

God wants us to slow down...
 to drink from the still waters,
 to rest in the green pastures,
 to experience the restoration and renewal of our souls.

And there is another reason why the psalm speaks of God's presence in the good
 times of life.

Good times are risky for us.

When my marriage is fine,
 my kids okay,
 my career flourishing,
 my health good,
 my retirement plan portfolio on the rise,
 what need do I have of God?

I can manage quite nicely myself, thank you!

Good times have always been dangerous for individuals.

In one of Jesus' parables, the rich man's barns were full and he leaned back and said to his soul, "eat, drink, and be merry."

This is something all of us need to be careful about,
 especially those of us who are fortunate enough to be in higher economic brackets.

Full barns have a way of creating empty hearts, if we are not careful.

Good times are times of high risk.

Remember that it is the Good Shepherd who got us to the still waters in the first place and who goes with us every step of the way.

It is not just automobiles that are recalled by their maker, you know!

It is a psalm for all seasons,
 this 23rd Psalm,
 because it describes the season of joy in life,
 urging us to recognize the green pastures
 and to remember the Good Shepherd who brought us there.

IV

But all seasons, we said,
and so the psalm recognizes the shadow times of life also.

Imagine again that we rewrote the psalm and here's the way it goes this time:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters; he restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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.

How does this version sound?

No more shadow of death.

No more enemies.

And no more relevance for our lives!

The 23rd Psalm candidly faces the inevitable.

It proclaims not if, but though:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

Life isn't all loaded tables,
 overflowing cups,
 and green pastures.

Green pastures can turn brown under the blazing sun.

Still waters can grow turbulent with trouble.

"With regard to death," someone has said, "every person is an unfortified city."

Sometimes our hair isn't anointed with oil,
 but grimed with grease.

Sometimes we find ourselves not lying in green pastures,
 but flailing on blue Monday.

Sometimes we are not resting by the still waters,
 but struggling through the darkest valley.

All of us have times when we must traverse the dark valley of the shadow of death and dine in the very presence of our enemies.

It never helps us to pretend otherwise.

Robert Frost wrote, "I have been one acquainted with the night."

So have we all.

No one gets through life without walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

But the 23rd Psalm makes clear that God does not intend for us to stay there forever.

The valley of the shadow of death is something one goes through.

Valleys are not resting places, but passageways.

We can walk through our problems.

We can walk through our sorrows.

We can walk through our pain.

We can walk through our sins.

We can walk through the darkest valley because,
 as this Psalm for all Seasons reminds us,
 the Lord is our shepherd and will always be there
 to walk with us through whatever valley we face.

As the old spiritual goes:

*You've got to walk that lonesome valley,
 You've got to walk it by yourself,
 Oh, nobody else can walk it for you,
 You've got to walk it by yourself.*

But the song also reminds us of something that we find in the 23rd Psalm—

*Jesus walked that lonesome valley,
He had to walk it by himself,
Oh, nobody else could walk it for him,
He had to walk it by himself.*

Yes, Jesus walked that lonesome valley,
and he is there,
ever there,
to walk it with us.

V

In the final verse we are told...

*“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 English translation doesn’t quite get at the strength and force of the Hebrew.

The Hebrew word for “follow” is actually the word “pursue.”

Usually in the Psalms it is the psalmist’s enemies who are pursuing her,
but here it is God’s goodness and mercy that are in pursuit.

Goodness and mercy are not like two puppy dogs following us around with their tails wagging behind them.

Goodness and mercy are more like the Hounds of Heaven pursuing lost souls for the kingdom of God.

What a powerful image—

God actively pursuing us,
not out of wrath,
not out of vengeance,
but with goodness and loving-kindness.

If only we could stop running and let ourselves be caught!

Then the psalmist reaches the high point of the psalm:

“I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

This is a different translation from the King James Version that most of us learned, and it may not feel quite right to us.

Isn't it supposed to be “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”?

Well, no, actually, the more accurate translation is “for length of days.”

As Christians we believe in the resurrection,
in a glorious eternity with God,
and so we interpret this psalm in that light.

But at the time it was composed there really wasn't a concept in Judaism of a glorious afterlife.

The notion of resurrection, of life after death, was not a part of Jewish thought until a couple of centuries before Jesus was born—
and even then there was disagreement about it among the Jews.

This psalm was not about dying and what comes after death.

It was about living—
living in God's presence
and trusting in that presence through all the seasons of life.

As people of the resurrection still celebrating the Easter season,
we know that eternal life with God in Christ begins now and will continue into eternity.

Today's reading from the Gospel of John affirm this, as Jesus says,

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” (John 10:27-28)

When originally composed, the 23rd Psalm was not about eternal life after death;
it was about life here and now,
 life lived in God's presence,
 a life of absolute trust in the care of the Lord who is our
 shepherd in all the seasons of life.

VI

I've preached on the 23rd Psalm many times over the years, but the first time I preached it, over 30 years ago, I came across a story that I would like to conclude with:

A young ministerial student was invited to serve as the student pastor of a small country church.

His first week there he went to call on a little old lady who had been bedfast for five years, and who (he was told) would not live much longer.

The young man had no notion of what to do on such a call,
but to her house he went,
 and there she was, bedfast but spirited.

"I'm the new preacher," he said.

"How old are you," she asked.

"Twenty," he replied.

"Not very old," she said.

"It's as old as I could get in 20 years," he said.

"Have you ever called on a dying person?" she asked him.

No, he admitted, he had not.

"Well, I can't do much," she said, "but I can tell you how to do that. Did you bring your Bible?"

Yes, the young man knew that much, so he pulled it out.

“Always start with the 14th chapter of John,” she said. “That’s the part about many mansions in my Father’s house. Then Romans 8 is always good. ‘Not even death can separate us from the love of God.’ But whatever you read, always end with the 23rd Psalm. It takes care of everything. And if you can learn this little poem, that will be good too.”

And she handed the young man a clipping of a poem by Annie Johnson Flint.

For over a year that young student pastor read the scriptures to that woman—
 John 14,
 Romans 8,
 one or two passages he found on his own—
 and he always ended with the 23rd Psalm.

Now, it would be a nice ending to the story to say that the pastor read the 23rd Psalm for her the last time at her graveside in the little country cemetery.

But not so—that woman outlived half the town.

She lived another fifteen years,
 and she trained another eight or ten young preachers
 on how to make a call on a dying person—
a slowly dying person.

VII

For that woman and for millions of others, the 23rd Psalm has indeed served as a Psalm for All Seasons.

It is the Psalm that “takes care of everything.”

It is realistic reminder of the life we live and of God’s promise to be with us in both the good and the bad.

Life will always be a mixture of green pastures and dark valleys.

But through it all, the Lord who is our Shepherd is to be found in both the roses and the thorns.

The poem by Annie Johnson Flint sums it all up:

*God has not promised skies ever blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God has not promised skies without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.*

*But God has promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labor, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Thanks, old friend. Thanks.

Amen.

A note on sources:

Various sources have been utilized to craft several versions of this sermon over the last 30+ years. The original source was a sermon by a Disciples of Christ minister that I found in the library of Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis about 1984. I don't remember his name, but the closing story was his experience. Others whose writings contributed over the years include Leonard Sweet and William Willimon. For this version of the sermon the following additional resources were used:

Kelly J. Murphy, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2827

David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1498>

Fred R. Anderson, <http://www.mapc.com/worship/sermons/2010/04/25/a-psalm-to-live-by>