

BESIDE STILL WATERS

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 16, 2018
based on Ezekiel 34:11-24; Psalm 23:1-3a***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a fall sermon series on the twenty-third Psalm entitled, "Beside Still Waters." We noted over the past two weeks that the psalm is identified as a psalm of David, and David's story lies behind much of it. David as a boy was, of course, a shepherd; and although it is believed that David wrote the psalm towards the end of his life, after he had long since left shepherding, he used the imagery of shepherding to describe the nature of God and the experience of the person who trusts in God. So far we have considered the beginning of the psalm "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." Today we continue with the words, "He leadeth me beside the still waters; he restoreth my soul." (Psalm 23:2b-3a) {prayer}

The image of still waters is a very peaceful one, and intentionally so in this psalm, because the Hebrew word translated as "still" has the basic meaning of "restful." You have very likely been on vacation sometime, or on some sort of outing, where you were "beside still waters," and felt a sense of peace. But what is striking about Psalm 23 is that these words were not written by David when he was on vacation at some peaceful spot. He wrote this when he was in one of the most stressful circumstances in his life. We noted last week that scholars believe David wrote Psalm 23 during Absalom's rebellion. Absalom, one of David's sons, had mounted an attempted coup against David, marshalling a rebel army and advancing upon Jerusalem, which forced David, who was caught by surprise, to flee. Imagine how David felt when his own son seized the capital city, and David was running for his life. David took refuge in remote village called Mahanaim, and it was there, we believe, that he wrote Psalm 23—when he was in grief over the faithlessness of his son, when the outcome of the rebellion was completely uncertain, and when it might all end for David not only with the loss of his kingdom but the loss of his life. How, in such circumstances, could he talk about God leading him beside still waters? It was an extraordinary statement, which declares that God can bring peace even in the midst of the most turbulent times.

Shepherds know that when it comes to drinking water, sheep very much prefer still waters. They do not like rushing streams at all, because the turbulent water makes them fear that they might be swept away. For centuries, shepherds in the Middle East, if they needed to water their sheep at a fast-flowing stream, have responded to that situation by putting rocks or sod in the water to make a little dam in order to create a quiet pool along the edge of the stream. I wonder if David had this practice in mind when he spoke of God leading to still waters. The waters may be turbulent, but the shepherd can still the waters. Indeed the Hebrew translated "still waters" could also be translated "stilled waters"—rough waters that have been quieted. The Lord our shepherd is who can quiet the

threatening turbulence of life. This would connect with one of the most memorable stories of Jesus, when he was with the disciples in a boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and he commanded the waves, saying, “Peace, be still!” At that moment, the Scripture says, “the wind ceased, and there was a complete calm.” [*Jesus said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a complete calm. Mark 4:39*] The message, both in that gospel story and in Psalm 23, is that the life of faith may not always be smooth, but even in the midst of very stressful times, we can find in the Lord a profound peace.

There is another aspect of David’s past that might also be reflected in the image of still waters. When he was a young adult, David became a successful general fighting to free the Israelites from Philistine oppression. King Saul, however, became jealous of David’s success, fearing that David might become a threat, and he began to seek David’s life. David was forced to flee from Saul into the wilderness, and he came into the region around the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea valley is one of the most desolate areas on earth. There is a large body of water, of course; but the Dead Sea has so much salt you can’t even sink in it. Nothing lives there, and of course you cannot drink the water. But in that bleak environment David came to En Gedi, an oasis that is near the Dead Sea. It is a wonderfully lush and peaceful spot. Freshwater springs create waterfalls and pools, supporting abundant greenery and animal life. There David found a refuge. Perhaps he had that experience in the back of his mind when he wrote of God, “He leadeth me beside the still waters.” The meaning again is that even in the most difficult times, we can find, through faith in God, a place of refreshment and renewal.

All this connects with the next phrase in the psalm, “He restoreth my soul.” The word translated “soul” is the Hebrew word “nephesh,” which basically means “life” or “living being.” So with regard to sheep, the phrase would have the meaning of restoring a sheep to life. The Hebrew word translated “restore” has the sense of “bringing back.” It has the same root as the word for “repent”—the Hebrew word, *shuv*, which means to turn around or return to God. This relates to a key problem in the life of sheep, the problem of getting lost.

You likely can recall a favorite nursery rhyme that has to do with shepherding—about Little Bo Peep. “Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep and can’t tell where to find them. Leave them alone, and they’ll come home, bringing their tails behind them.” This little rhyme is never used as a manual for shepherds, first of all because Little Bo Peep was obviously not very good at shepherding—she lost apparently not just one of her sheep but all of them. But more than that, the advice given in this nursery rhyme is all wrong! Leave sheep alone and they won’t come home. Sheep have a terrible sense of direction and are in serious trouble when they get lost.¹ This is why a key role of a shepherd is to retrieve lost sheep.

A fundamental problem in human life is that people lose their way. We wander off from God, and can find ourselves then in serious trouble. Psalm 23 is telling us that the Lord our shepherd is at work to bring us back, to restore us to life with God. The prophet

Ezekiel, writing 500 years after the twenty-third psalm, reiterated that theme beautifully in a prophecy that we heard in part last week, and we heard the rest of it this morning; Ezekiel said:

“My sheep were scattered, they wandered all over the mountains, with no one to search for them. But thus says the Lord God, 'I myself will search for my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered . . . I will seek the lost and bring back the strays, I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.’”

[Ezekiel 14:6, 11-12,16]

We noted last week how this prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, the Good Shepherd; and it is significant that Jesus told a parable precisely along this line. He said, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ (Luke 15:4-6)

In this parable, Jesus builds upon the broad awareness among people in his day that a shepherd, having lost a sheep, will surely go searching diligently after it, and will rejoice when sheep is found and can be brought back under the shepherd’s care. This illuminates what we are to understand when the Scripture says that the Lord is our shepherd. God is not just passively waiting for us to somehow find our way to God. God searches for us. As Ezekiel said of God, “I myself will search for my sheep . . . I will seek after the lost and bring back the strays.” God reaches to us through Christ, and through the working of the Holy Spirit, to bring us back into fellowship with God. When we become aware of God, is it because God has come to us. God is perpetually at work with compassion to find us when we stray and stumble and to restore our soul by lifting us up into a life-giving connection with God.

It is perhaps especially striking to hear these words of restoration and still waters in light of Hurricane Florence, as it is still lashing the east coast. That hurricane is a powerful image of the great turbulence that can befall any one of us at any time in life. In Myrtle Beach, there is a coffee shop that boarded up its windows, with one board boldly proclaiming, “God is good.” How could someone say, “God is good,” when a huge hurricane was coming, forcing evacuation, making the coffee shop close its doors, and threatening major destruction. The person who wrote that sign could do so for the same reason that David, in desperate circumstances at Mahanaim, could say that the Lord leads us by still waters and restores our soul. It is because even in the midst of a storm, we can find strength and peace and life when we trust in God. On the sign at that coffee shop, there is a reference to Psalm 91, verses one through sixteen. Those verses are not the source of the statement, “God is good,” which is found instead in other psalms. The person who wrote on that board clearly intended that people should look at Psalm 91, where you will find these words:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.”

You will not fear the terror of the night . . . or the destruction that wastes at noonday . . . because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place When they call to me, says the Lord, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation. (from Psalm 91:1-16)

This is the core message of Psalm 23—that we find sure help and protection in the presence of God. At the same time, people dealing with Hurricane Florence are finding help not only as they trust in God, but as they are inspired by God to reach out and help one another. One of the notable features of the response to the hurricane has been the way that communities have been at work, with people at all levels, from government officials to emergency responders to neighbors and volunteers, cooperating together to enable everyone to come through the storm in the best way possible. Our United Methodist churches in coastal North and South Carolina were very active in helping people to prepare for the hurricane; and our United Methodist Committee on Relief, UMCOR, has already laid the groundwork for Early Response teams to go into the affected areas as soon as the storm has past.

The importance of community relates also to Psalm 23. We noted in the opening sermon of this series that the image of the shepherd and the flock is itself an image of community, since a shepherd typically has not just one sheep but many sheep together. But the sheep don’t always get along. We noted last week how sheep will sometimes butt heads and fight for position. This relates to something that Ezekiel said in the latter part of the passage we heard. Ezekiel spoke with disgust about how some people were exploiting other people and wrecking things for others. Using the imagery of the flock, he said, “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of the pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? Therefore, thus says the Lord God: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. (Ezekiel 34:18-23) So Ezekiel spoke of how God would intercede on behalf of the disenfranchised and the weak, and how God finally would “set up one shepherd, my servant David.” This refers not to David himself, who had died five hundred years earlier, but to the descendant of David, namely, the Messiah. Again this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus, who would lead us beyond our brokenness into a condition of shalom—a state of wholeness and community wellbeing. In this light, the “still waters” of Psalm 23 are an indication not only of the personal peace that we can have with God, but the peace in which God would have us live with one another.

Into such peace God is leading us. We are invited to put our faith in the Lord our Shepherd, and so to experience the words of the psalm: He leadeth me beside the still waters; He restoreth my soul.

ⁱ. See Haddon W. Robinson, Trusting the Shepherd (Discovery House Publishers, 1968), p. 51.