

## **GREEN PASTURES**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 9, 2018 based on Mark 6:34-44, Psalm 23:1b-2a***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series based on the twenty-third Psalm entitled, "Beside Still Waters." We began last week with the titling of the Psalm in the original Hebrew, where it is identified as a Psalm of David, and we observed that the story of David lies behind much of this Psalm. We considered the opening phrase, "The Lord is my shepherd," and we will continue in the Psalm this morning. {prayer}

We noted last week that Psalm 23 is an all-time favorite because it encapsulates enormous meaning in a few simple verses. The opening statement, "The Lord is my shepherd," says that God is near to us and watches over us—as a shepherd watches over the sheep—that God cares for us and will guide and protect us. The Psalm continues by picturing the effect that faith in God as shepherd will have on our life, as it says, "I shall not want."

That is an amazing statement for our society. We want all the time! Our society is geared toward encouraging us to want more and more. But Psalm 23 would move us toward an entirely different orientation.

In the original Hebrew, the precise meaning of verse one, is "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want" or "I shall lack nothing." Does this mean that God will give us everything that we want, so that if we just have enough faith in God, we will never lack for money or health or anything else we might desire? That cannot be what this means, because of the experience of David himself, who wrote the Psalm. It is believed that David wrote Psalm 23 towards the end of his life, and he had had by then many experiences of loss and privation. There was a time when, as a young man, he had to flee for his life from King Saul, and he was lacking a great deal. As a parent, he suffered the deaths of several of his children; and he had one son, Absalom, who rebelled against his throne. Scholars believe that Psalm 23 was most likely written during the worst moments of Absalom's rebellion, and we will see during this series the reasons why scholars believe that. The rebellion began when Absalom secretly raised a rebel army and then advanced upon Jerusalem to seize the throne from his father. David, hearing of the rebellion, fled from Jerusalem in great haste with a small company of followers. Full of grief, he made his way to a remote village called Mahanaim, and there, we believe, he wrote the Psalm. That would mean that Psalm 23 was written when David had lost or was on the verge of losing just about everything—his family, his home, his kingship, and his life. So how could he possibly say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing"? What David had found, through all his trials, was that no matter what on this earth he may lack, if he had God, he had what he needed.

One day in a Sunday School class, a little girl stood up to recite the twenty-third Psalm. She began, "The Lord is my shepherd, He's all I want." I believe she got it right. Psalm 23 leads us to recognize that God is the answer to what we need—we find fulfillment and strength in life when what we want above all is a relationship with God; because when we come into the care of the Shepherd, we find that God will sustain us even in the midst of great trials, and we find our true satisfaction not in passing things but the sure blessings of God. When our desire is directed above all to God, we are on the right track. This was a lesson that David had learned earlier in his life, especially through

painful experience.

There was a time, when he was younger, when David was not yet at the spiritual level reflected in Psalm 23, and he got carried away with what he thought he wanted. He was king in Jerusalem, highly successful, living in great wealth and power, having a large family, adored by his subjects; he seemed to have everything. But he wanted more. His eye fell on a woman next door, Bathsheba, and he began an adulterous relationship that nearly ruined everything. When he was finally confronted by the prophet Nathan, he was forced to recognize that he had gotten grievously off track. He acknowledged his sin; and he repented—which means not only that he felt deeply sorry for his sin, but he turned his life around. He directed his life afresh toward God. He realized that it was only through faith in God that he would find what he truly needed.

People today so often think that they need something more—a better job, a better house, a better car. Maybe you do need a better car . . . but what Psalm 23 says is that what you and I really need is God. When we take hold of the Lord as our shepherd, then are we on the path toward a truly blessed life. This is why Jesus said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God, and then all else will be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33)

The nature of life in fellowship with God is further described as the psalm continues and says, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” Psalm 23 has appropriately been called “the shepherd's psalm.” As a boy, David of course was a shepherd, and in this psalm he richly utilizes the imagery of shepherding to describe the experience of those who fully trust in God. To understand the images in the Psalm, it helps therefore to know something about sheep and shepherding in the Middle East.

David speaks in verse 2 of green pastures, but if you know anything about Israel, you know that pastures there are not usually green. They are brown much of the time; so the image of green pastures is an image of great abundance. Another thing you might observe anywhere about sheep is that usually they are not lying down. The image in verse 2 of sheep lying down in the pasture is thus a very special image of rest and peace.

A particularly enlightening book in this regard, which has become something of a classic, is one entitled *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. The author, Phillip Keller, had years of experience as an actual shepherd, running ranching operations in various places, and he viewed the twenty third psalm from that perspective. Keller noted that in order for sheep to lie down in a pasture, four things are necessary.

The sheep must have freedom from fear. They are not about to lie down if they think that a wolf might be just over the rise.

The sheep must have freedom from friction with one another. Sheep in a flock, it seems, are constantly battling for position; they have what shepherds call a “butting order.” They regularly butt heads or intimidate one another, and as long as they are concerned about fighting for position against another sheep they will not lie down.

The sheep must also have freedom from pests. Flies and other bugs bother sheep a lot, and they cannot lie down if they are constantly shaking off pests.

Finally, sheep must have a full belly.

Sheep don't lie down very much.

You may note that there are strong parallels between the things that agitate sheep and the things that agitate us. We are troubled by fear, especially fears about potentially serious threats. We are troubled by friction with other people. We are troubled by all sorts of irritating things that bug us. And we get worried about not having enough. So we may find that we don't lie down very much either, in a spiritual sense and maybe in a physical sense; it can be hard for us to come to a state of peace.

In working with sheep, Phillip Keller noted that what calms sheep the most is the presence of the shepherd.<sup>i</sup> This of course is the central message of Psalm 23—that when we have the Lord as our Shepherd, we have the fundamental answer to all those troubles which would rob us of peace.

We have the answer, first of all, to fear. When the shepherd appears among a flock of sheep, the sheep become noticeably more relaxed, primarily because they see the shepherd as a protector—the wolves are at bay as long as the shepherd is at hand. This is what happens in the Biblical story when people become aware that God is among them—they are able to find release from fear. Consider, for example, how the Christmas story unfolds when scribes recall how the prophets had said, “From you, Bethlehem, shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” [Matt. 2: 6] When that divine shepherd appears in Bethlehem, angels announce his birth by saying, “Fear not” [Luke 2:10] They say that to a group of shepherds among their sheep, so that we get the point that when the Lord our Shepherd is among us, we no longer need to be afraid; or as Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, proclaimed of the Messiah, “Being rescued from the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear.” [Luke 1:73]

Of course, the wolves are still out there. We hear of terrible evils in the news every day, and we are confronted by all kinds of threats in our own lives. But what David understood is that the shepherd is stronger than the wolves; so the twenty-third Psalm is telling us that we need not fear when we put our trust in God.

The shepherd can also bring freedom from friction with our neighbors. How often do we get agitated by other people? Today there seems to be ever more conflict in our society at large. Especially in the realm of politics, people are feeling increasing animosity toward those on the other side. But concerning his flocks of sheep, Philip Keller reported that “whenever I came into view and my presence attracted their attention, the sheep quickly forgot their foolish rivalries and stopped their fighting.”<sup>ii</sup> How much do we need the divine Shepherd’s presence among us today, to move us past divisions and bickering, so that we might work in positive ways together. Christ the good shepherd inspires us to see that we are each loved and infinitely valued by God; so instead of constantly butting heads with each other, we can unite in the harmony of the Lord's flock.

The shepherd in the field also brings relief from all those bugs that pester sheep. Even in ancient times, shepherds applied ointments to sheep that acted as bug repellents, and modern shepherds have various sprays to drive off those pests. Today there are all sorts of irritations that disturb us—whether it is physical ailments or annoying problems in life or just the things that go wrong in the course of a day. It is hard to be at peace when there are constantly things that annoy us. But when the Lord our shepherd is near, God’s Spirit can function in us like a soothing balm. As the Psalmist said, “When cares increase in my heart, Your consolation calms my soul.” (Psalm 94:19)

Finally, the shepherd answers the sheep’s yearning for a full belly by leading the sheep to the

best pasture. Likewise, the Lord our Shepherd would satisfy our deepest needs, and this is especially what is symbolized in the image of sheep lying down in green pasture. There is a fascinating story along this line in that gospel account that we heard about the feeding of the 5000 from Mark chapter 6. You may recall that we considered this story in detail last winter in a sermon that was a part of the Journey to Jerusalem sermon series. Mark reports that Jesus encountered a large group of people and He saw that “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” [Mark 6:34] So Jesus began to teach them. It started to get late, and the people did not have any food. So Jesus, Mark tells us, had the people “sit down in groups on the green grass.” [Mark 6:39] Biblical scholars point out that Mark says *green* grass for a reason—because he sees Jesus here enacting the twenty-third Psalm. He makes his flock lie down in green pastures; and he feeds the five thousand so that “all ate and were filled.” [Mark 6:42] The clear message of the story is that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will abundantly provide for us, not only physically but spiritually. Christ satisfies what we truly need.

Five hundred years after David wrote the twenty-third Psalm, the prophet Ezekiel proclaimed, “Thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out . . . I will feed them with good pasture, on the mountain heights of Israel; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.” (Ezekiel 34:11–15) Ezekiel was clearly saying that God in a decisive way would carry out the themes of the twenty-third Psalm. That prophecy of Ezekiel came then to its ultimate fulfillment five hundred years after Ezekiel in Jesus. Jesus appeared as one who would seek the lost; he would be the Good Shepherd, who would enable people finally to “lie down in green pastures.” We are invited today to put our faith in Christ, and so to find, through His grace, what we need.

<sup>i</sup> Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Zondervan, 1970), p. 25

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.