

THE RIGHT PATHS

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 23, 2018

Based on Jeremiah 6:16–17; Psalm 143:8–10; Psalm 25:8–10; Psalm 23:1–3b

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a fall sermon series on the twenty-third Psalm entitled, "Beside Still Waters." We have noted in previous sermons that the psalm was written by David. The first time we meet David in the Bible, he is a young boy, concerning whom his father Jesse says to the prophet Samuel, "He is out keeping the sheep." (I Samuel 16:11) He would later leave shepherding behind and become the king of Israel, and it was towards the end of his life as king when he wrote the psalm; but in Psalm 23 he was drawing on his early experience as a shepherd to describe, in the most memorable language, the intended relationship between God and human beings. So far we have considered the opening of the psalm: "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." (Psalm 23:1–3a) Today we continue with the words: "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." (Psalm 23:3b) {prayer}

You will note that I have been using the King James Version of Psalm 23 for this sermon series. There are some churches that want to believe that God somehow uniquely inspired the King James Version. They will even advertise themselves as "KJV churches." But when the Bible says that "all Scripture is inspired by God" (II Timothy 3:16), it means that the Spirit of God was guiding the Biblical writers and editors, and they writing not in King James English but in Hebrew or Greek. When it came to translating the Hebrew and Greek into English, the committee appointed by King James of England did do a very good job, in 1611; but we have made some progress in understanding Hebrew and Greek since 1611, and we don't talk like King James anymore, so the best way to read the Bible today is to use a good modern translation, as we typically do in worship. But there are a couple of cases in which the King James Version of a passage is not only an excellent translation but has gained such a deep-seated traditional use in the church that it is valuable to keep using it. There is one time every year in our church when you will hear the King James Version of the main Scripture passage—on Christmas Eve, when we read the story of Jesus in the manger. The other occasion when we generally use the King James is whenever we are reading Psalm 23.

In the King James Version, verse three says: "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness." That is a perfectly acceptable translation, but the simplest good translation of the original Hebrew, and the translation in many modern versions, is: "He leads me in the right paths." This reading relates very much to the experience of sheep. One of the key problems that sheep face is that they get off track. As we noted last week, they lose their way and can end up hopelessly lost. This can happen very easily in a semi-arid landscape such as that of Israel, where there are lots of openings through sparse brush, and various gullies, and old tracks that other animals have made. It is not uncommon that a sheep will wander onto a false path leading into desolate and dangerous country.

So a central role of the shepherd is, as the psalm says, "to lead in right paths." Throughout the Bible, we see God precisely in this role. There are times when God literally leads people, such as when God led the people of Israel out of Egypt through the wilderness. As the book of Exodus says, "The Lord went in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by a day and pillar of fire by night, to *lead* them along the

way" [Exodus 13:21] More often, God leads people spiritually, guiding people to go in the right direction in life, to be able to live their life rightly. Psalm 143, a portion of which we heard this morning, is one of many Psalms that offer a prayer along this line. As it says, "Teach me, O Lord the way I should go . . . let your good Spirit *lead* me on a level path." (Psalm 143:8,10) In all of these passages, the word translated "lead" is exactly the same word in the original Hebrew,ⁱ the word *nachah*, which has a sense of guiding in a way of blessing.

The problem, though, is that human beings often do not pay attention to God's leading and stray off the right path. David did this in a disastrous way when he got into an adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, a story we recalled in a previous sermon in this series. But when David was confronted by the prophet Nathan, he repented, and turned back to God. That experience of getting back on the right track with God was likely in the back of David's mind when he wrote of God, "He leads me in right paths."

But still further, it is not only individuals who can get on the wrong path in life. Whole societies can get off track. This occurred during the history of Israel when the people of Israel began increasingly to ignore God's leading. In the sixth century B.C., that pattern resulted in disaster, as the people of Israel, having paid no attention to God, ended up being conquered by the Babylonian empire and carried off into exile. The prophet Jeremiah, who lived in the midst of that period, spoke of how God had been seeking to lead the people in His paths of blessing, but they had turned away. As he said:

"Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, "We will not walk in it." I raised up sentinels for you [likely referring to the many prophets of Israel]: "Give heed to the sound of the trumpet!" But they said, "We will not give heed." (Jeremiah 6:16-17) That refusal to give heed to God led finally to the trauma of the exile, when the people spent fifty years in bondage in Babylon. All this raises the question, of course, as to whether we are on the right path today.

"Ask where the good way lies," says Jeremiah, "and walk in in, and find rest for your souls." (Jeremiah 6:16) That image of getting on the right path appears repeatedly throughout the Bible. But what exactly is the right path, and how do we know when we are on it? A common attitude today is that the right path is whatever feels right to you at the moment. But when sheep are wandering off toward disaster, the errant path onto which they are wandering is exactly what feels right to them at the moment! We need some sort of greater guidance to be and stay on the right path.

Here it is helpful to recognize that in Psalm 23 the phrase that can be translated "right paths" also means "paths of righteousness"—the King James Version here is correct. The Hebrew word meaning "right" or "righteous" is the word *ṭṣedeq* (*tsedek*), which denotes that which is morally right and good, that which is just and upright. So the right path is the righteous path. It is the way that is in harmony with God's principles of goodness and justice. Too often today, we see individuals or corporate entities or political alliances choosing to do whatever brings short-term profit or advantage. Psalm 23 calls us to a much higher ethic—to do what is genuinely right and good. And the Psalm makes clear how we can know what is truly right and good—by looking to the Lord our Shepherd, for God is at work to guide us onto the right path, if we pay heed. As the Psalmist said in Psalm 25, "Good and upright is the Lord . . . God leads the humble in what is right." (Psalm 25:8-9)

Of course, sometimes, even if we want to be on the right path, we err and go off down the wrong way. The prophet Isaiah spoke about this universal human pattern of getting off track when he said, “All we like sheep have gone astray.” (Isaiah 53:6) But Isaiah goes on in that same passage to speak of how Christ would take upon himself all our sins, so that we can be forgiven and brought back onto the right path with God. The Lord our Shepherd knows that we are frail and acts decisively to restore us into fellowship with God.

So the words of Psalm 23—“He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness”—describe how we are being drawn by God’s Spirit into a connection with God that will enable us finally to journey in God’s goodness, and to reflect that goodness to the world. But then the psalm continues with the phrase, “for His name’s sake.” This pushes beyond the fundamental action of doing good into the deeper question of what motivates people.

What is it that motivates people to do good today? To answer that, just consider a simple and common scenario. Suppose you are a high school administrator considering how to raise money for the sports boosters and the music boosters at the school. You could simply say to people, “Please contribute quietly to the booster fund, and we will keep everything you do a secret.” Administrators know that this will not work. There are three basic approaches that do commonly work and that are broadly used.

First, appeal to people’s vanity. People love recognition, so if you promise to put their name in the program or somewhere, they are more likely to give. Some people don’t really care about that, of course; but there are plenty who do, and this is why institutions regularly use this technique on a grand scale—you see it all the time. It especially works well if you can have many different giving levels that are also published, so that people can see that their neighbor or classmate is giving more, and then they feel compelled to move up to the next level so that they don’t look cheap!

A second good technique is to appeal to people’s greed. Offer the possibility of a big cash payout. Thus we have the popularity of raffles. People especially love charity raffles, because even if they lose, they can at least console themselves with the fact that they contributed to a good cause. In a 50/50, the cause, of course, only gets fifty percent of the funds put forward; but it is the promised potential of reward that motivates a lot of giving.

The third technique is the fundraiser—running concession stands, for example. This is more difficult, because it requires the existence of some genuinely goodhearted, hardworking people who will volunteer to staff the concession stands for no tangible benefit at all. But all you need is a relatively small group of such people. The funds are generated by the fact that lots of people will readily spend their money for snacks. I am personally glad that the concession stands are there.

In each of these approaches, people contribute their funds to a cause in exchange for some reward. If I put forth my money, I can get my name in print, or I might win the raffle, or I at least get a hot dog. In each case, I am motivated to do some good, because it is, at least to some degree, for my sake. I am getting personal benefit or glory.

I do not fault school administrators or any institutions that use these techniques. In taking these approaches, they are in fact building upon a Biblical assessment of the human condition—that human beings are naturally self-centered. Techniques that entice people to give by offering rewards or recognitions are cleverly exploiting that natural self-centeredness, to produce some real good in

the end. But such techniques only go so far. Total giving by non-churchgoing people in America, through every avenue, is at less than 1% of their annual income.

You will notice that we do not use any of these techniques in church. When you put something into the church offering plate, or text your gift or use any form of electronic giving, your name does not go up onto the projection screen, nor does it appear later in any list of donors in the church newsletter, nor is there a moment at the end of worship when we draw an envelope number and announce the winner of today's lottery. You *can* get a snack at church, if you go to the fellowship hour at 11:30, but that's free! The church does not offer any tangible rewards for doing good. Why not? It is because when we are following the Lord our Shepherd, we do good for His name's sake.

That simple phrase—"for His name's sake"—points to the heart of the spiritual transformation that Jesus would bring about in human life. It is the movement from the self-centered life to the God-centered life. Jesus spoke to this when he called people to "deny yourself to follow Christ," and to "seek first the kingdom of God." The movement from self-centeredness toward God-centeredness is also behind Jesus' teaching about giving when he said, "Whenever you give, do not sound a trumpet before you . . . so as to be praised by others. But when you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be done in secret." (Matthew 6:2-4) The church is unique in society as an institution whose primary means of raising funds involves people quietly giving in secret. This works in the church because people are motivated to give, and to engage in service to others, out of a commitment to God. When we walk in paths of righteousness—when we do good—for *His* name's sake, we are drawn beyond ourselves into much larger purposes, and a much higher calling—into the work of God's Kingdom; and we give the glory to God. This is why churches in America are the source of the great majority of charitable giving and service in our society,ⁱⁱ because people are on a path in which it is not, in the end, about self-gain or self-glorification but about God.

Psalms 23 moves us finally to consider what path we are on in life. At times we may sense that we have drifted off track. At times we may feel like a sheep that is looking at multiple apparent paths, not sure which way to go. But wherever we are, the answer is to look to the Shepherd, who will guide us on the right path, wherein we share in genuine goodness and wholeness and outreach in fellowship with God.

ⁱ It is the word נָחַח—*nachah*, in the hiphil form

ⁱⁱ To say that "churches are the source of the great majority of charitable giving" is to recognize that giving arises not only through church channels but that people who are active in churches are particularly motivated to give through other channels as well. The strength of religiously inspired giving has been well documented. Moreover, churches operate in a fashion such that a great deal of giving occurs beyond even what is even counted in statistics, as churches regularly take collections of food or clothing, and inspire the giving of enormous amounts of hours of service to the community.