

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**May 3, 2020, Easter Sunday**

Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

### FOLLOWING THE SHEPHERD

I begin with a confession that this sermon, in a slightly different form, was preached on May 7, 2017 in our sanctuary. As I spent time with Psalm 23 this week, I realized that the teaching in this sermon holds words and comfort for us in the midst of this Covid19 Season. Now I won't ask if you remember what I said three years ago, but if you do, I apologize for the repetition. 😊

What do you feel when you hear the words: "The Lord is my Shepherd?"

Do you feel comfort?

Or do you feel sadness because the last time you heard these words they were at a loved ones funeral?

Do you feel loved because you have a God who protects and cares for you?

Do you feel a sense of homecoming because Psalm 23 is part of your prayer life, or an important part of our journey of faith, or it was or is important to someone you love?

Do you remember memorizing this Psalm in Sunday School, or Confirmation?

Or do you wonder what sheep and shepherds have to say to us today?

We started worship this morning with a reading of three different versions of the Psalm because for many of us, of a certain generation, it is one of the last passages of scripture we still prefer in the King James Version. So, I wanted us to hear the Psalm in different voices.

What I'd like to suggest this morning, is that no matter what your reaction is to the Psalm, that after this morning you will see it as a Psalm that is not just for sickbeds and funerals. Psalm 23 is a Psalm for each day of our lives, maybe now more than ever before in our lifetimes!

This morning I have no desire to take Psalm 23 away from funerals and hospital rooms, it belongs there. I will continue to recite this psalm with people in the hospital, and on their deathbeds, because its words of strong comfort are an incredible gift from God: "Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." We need its reminder that in life, in illness and in death that God is always with us and always caring for us.

And yet, I also believe that understanding the words of this Psalm in the here and now gives us a statement of faith and the gift of its words in our daily lives.

In whatever is going on in your lives in this season of Covid19,

I would guess that all of us need the reminder that God is always with us

and always caring for us, always walking before us in our lives.

This isn't just a Psalm for times of dying, but a Psalm for the living of each of the days of our lives.

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2 Lent through Eastertide*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010, p. 431.2.9

So what I'd like to do this morning is walk us through this Psalm to experience the ways it is meant for our daily living.

## **1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.**

The Psalmist picked an image for God that was familiar to him, and to those who heard it later. People in those days knew all about shepherds, because they were a part of daily living. But for most of us, sheep and shepherds are outside of our understanding

Just last week in our Adult Sunday School Class we were discussing John 10. Those in the class who had raised sheep, or been around sheep, were able to help the rest of us understand that passage. What I've learned from people who grew up around sheep, and from books, is that sheep are not the smartest animals. They really do need a shepherd to guide and protect them.

Shepherds in the time this Psalm was written, around 1000 B.C., and shepherds in Jesus' day, when he called himself the Good Shepherd, knew their sheep. They walked the hillsides with them. They cared for their injuries, they hunted for them when they were lost, and we're told they often had names for each of their sheep. At night they checked each sheep for injury or illness and then they stood guard over their sheep protecting them throughout the night.

Then in the morning the shepherds called to the sheep, who knew their voice, and they led their sheep out into the day.

Think about starting each day with these words: "The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need." Especially in the uncertainty of these days starting with these words calls us to look on the coming day from God's perspective, not our own.

Psalm 23 calls us to remember that every need of our lives is known to God, who cares about all that our days, our nights, and our lives hold. Moment by moment in our lives we are being led by our God who loves us, who knows us by name. As we hear Jesus say in John 10:14: "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."

## **2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.**

To understand these verses more deeply it helps to learn a bit more about sheep.

Sheep won't lie down to rest unless they feel safe.

And they can't eat until they feel safe.

Sheep also need to feel safe before they drink water.

A shepherd would lead the sheep to a place where the water was slow and smooth, so his sheep would feel safe enough to drink the water.

The Psalmist calls us to remember that God cares about all the needs of our lives: food, water and shelter. God isn't distant from the basic concerns of our lives; God is right in the midst of life offering us a place of daily rest and refreshment.

This week I learned a bit more about the phrase "he restores my soul." The word used for "soul" in Hebrew means the totality of one's being: body, soul, mind and strength. God cares for our whole self. So, this verse could be translated: God restores and repairs my whole being."

This part of the Psalm reminds us that we have God's complete care in all our lives.

Bartlett, p. 435.1.2

What a relief that when we come to God and let God lead us,  
we are following the one who brings us to peaceful places,  
who has the loving power to restore us to ourselves..

## **He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.**

A shepherd chose the pastures where his sheep would feed, the waters where they would drink, the places they would lie down and sleep. The shepherd knew the paths that would get the sheep where they needed to go. The shepherd did this because of who he was, for his name's sake. The Psalmist says God chooses the paths that are right for each of us, if we let God guide us.

I learned this week that in Hebrew the words for "he leads me," has the idea that "God leads me as a helpless one." People who knew about sheep would have understood that sheep really were helpless, and needed the shepherd for water, food, rest and life.

This Psalm calls us to remember we too are helpless and daily in need of our Good Shepherd.

It is especially in difficult times that we need to hold onto this promise of God's care, so the Psalmist wrote:

**Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me;**

The Psalmist used a word that could be translated: the darkest valley, the deepest despair, or the "valley of the shadow of death" to describe his deepest fears.

The way we describe our deepest fears will change with our age, and with what is going on in our lives. That is all part of our story. The last two months have brought a whole new vocabulary to our fears for ourselves and our loved ones. No matter what image we use for those fears, God always says to us: "Don't fear, I am with you, I am walking the darkest valley, the deepest despair, the valley of the shadow of death in front of you, I am with you.

The Psalm continues:

**your rod and your staff they comfort me.**

A shepherd's rod was a club that the shepherd used to protect his sheep from enemies. The shepherd would make this from a thick tree limb.

We learn in the story of King David's life that when he was a shepherd, he killed bears and lions to protect his sheep.

Moses carried a rod when he was a shepherd, before he saw the burning bush.

The shepherd's staff was a thinner pole, about 7-8 feet long, with a crooked end. The shepherd used the staff to guide the sheep along the right path. The crook was used to reach sheep that had fallen or were stuck and needed to be rescued.

Even in the darkest valley, in our deepest despair, in the valley of the shadow of death, God's love is there to guide us and protect us.

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;**

I've always wondered about the meaning of this verse and this week I found a helpful explanation. The author said we are to remember that sheep almost always ate in the presence of enemies. But because they felt the protection of the shepherd who was always with them, they could feel safe enough to graze, even when wolves, bears and lions were close by. (Bartlett, 435.1.5).

Another author writes: "We are invited to imagine entering a room filled with our enemies. God says to us, 'Right this way. I have prepared a banquet table for you. Please be seated.' So we take a seat and begin to eat the feast God has prepared—and we eat *right in front of our enemies*. He concludes: "Christians facing physical and spiritual enemies may call this image to mind and rejoice." (Bartlett, 432.2.9)

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**

“Anointing my head with oil” and “my cup overflows” can be looked at in two ways. When a host welcomed a guest to his home, he would pour oil over the guest’s head. It was a sign of respect, welcome and care. An overflowing cup was a sign of great generosity as they ate together.

If we read this as referring to shepherds, they also used oil. They would use it on their sheep’s wounds to help them heal. The overflowing cup once again shows the shepherd providing as much water as their sheep needed.

This Psalm calls us to remember daily that God provides for us with great abundance, and healing care. These words are not changed by the world pandemic. They are strong comfort that we are not alone in this season of change.

**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.**

Another way to hear this verse is that God’s love and mercy will “actively pursue” us all our days. Or a more literal translation: “Surely goodness and kindness shall dog me all my life.” “Every moment of life God is pursuing us, hounding us with goodness and kindness.” (Bartlett, 434.2.2)

And finally, we end with the promise that not only at death, but in all of life, we are living in God’s house, we are part of God’s family.

What a gift this Psalm is for us somewhat foolish, silly sheep who are constantly in need of a Shepherd. We are loved and cherished by our God, our Good Shepherd, who walks before us, caring for our whole selves, protecting us in this season of darkness and despair and death, showering us with abundance, shielding us from enemies, and welcoming us, always welcoming us into the heart of God’s home.

Let us keep this Psalm in front of us daily, because it holds reminders of the loving protection of our God that will never let us go, not only in death, but in the daily living of our lives. Amen.