

Surely Goodness and Mercy
Psalm 23
John 10:1-4

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 23 (KJV)

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.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

John 10:1-4

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

The last two weeks we have been talking about the Psalms, psalms of praise and lament. Like all psalms, these are also types of prayer that we can make to God, and that we should make to God when that’s what’s going on in our lives.

This week we come to one of the most familiar chapters in the entire Bible, Psalm 23. This psalm is an amazing expression of trust in God. Legend has it that it was written by King David, a man who knew something about sheep and shepherds.

I asked Carol to read this Psalm in the King James version, because that is the version that is engraved on the hearts of most English-speaking Christians. I have led worship in a nursing home and seen people whom the staff did not believe could hear or speak suddenly look up and speak the words with me, when I simply read this Psalm. It was amazing -- for just that moment, they were fully engaged with the worship of God.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

God loves us and leads us to where we need to be. In the person of Jesus Christ, He came down here and lived a human life. Like a shepherd, he does not ever ask us to go it alone, or to go where he has not already been. One of Jesus’ titles is “Emmanuel,” literally, “God with us.” Not a Creator God who wound the world up and walked away. Not a God at some far remove, watching us like a spectator in a stadium to see how we do, but God walking with us through the bright shiny times in our lives, and through the dark times.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.”

A shepherd leads sheep to what they need: green pastures to eat, and the still waters that are the only way they can drink. God leads us to what we need, if we will follow.

“He restoreth my soul.”

We all experience hurt and pain at one time or another. We all need the healing that only God can provide. Only God can truly make us whole again, and the good news is that God does it.

“He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

God will lead us to what we need, if we will follow. As we sang earlier, “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us.” We can get awfully far away from the paths of righteousness, but it is never too late to come back. God’s plans for us aren’t like a roadmap, with precise instructions for every step of the way. With a roadmap, if you go a long way out of your way, you have to go back where you started, and start over. But God’s plans are more like a GPS, or God Positioning

System, that points the way to get where we need to be, from where we are. When we have gone a long way away from where we need to be, we don't need to go back to childhood. We need to pray and ask for guidance. You may not hear your GPS say "Recalculating!", but that's what happens.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

We don't talk about theoretical stuff here in church. The Christian faith is not about, "If we lived in a nice, pretty world where everybody was nice and everything was roses and strawberries, all the time." The Christian faith is about the real world, where not everybody is nice, and where people whom we love and care about die, and where we sometimes feel do like we've been abandoned. The real world, where bad stuff does happen.

In that real world, our Lord walks with us and is there to comfort us. The rod and staff of a shepherd were more than symbols or weapons: they helped the shepherd nudge the sheep to a safe place. As long as the sheep could see the shepherd's rod and staff, they knew they were safe. God has promised to bring comfort to all those afflicted.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."

Every time we celebrate communion, every time we lift a cup and thank God, we celebrate Christ's death and resurrection with all the followers of Christ, across the whole world, and across all of time. The Apostles are at the table, and the saints throughout history. Not just the famous saints, the people who have congregations named after them, but the ordinary Christians too. Our relatives and our friends who are not physically here with us. We eat and

drink with all the saints, who from their labors rest. And that's just a foretaste, like Mom letting us lick the mixer beaters, to let us know what is coming for us in God's Kingdom.

Every time, we have a reminder that we can see and touch and taste that God loves us enough to come down here and be born and live and die and be resurrected for us.

"Thou anointest my head with oil."

Anointing is a gesture of hospitality and welcome. Like baptism, it is a physical statement that God loves you and you belong here. Truly I tell you, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹

You belong here in the gathering of God's saints, not because of your parents or your spouse or your children, but because God loves you. That is something that no one can ever take away from you, because no one is more powerful than God.

"My cup runneth over."

Our Lord will give us what we need, and more than we need. The limit is not what God is willing to give, that's limitless. The limit is our ability to receive. The limits are our fears, our pride, our insecurities.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

As wonderful as this image is, the translation is actually just a weak echo of what the psalm says.

¹ Romans 8:38-39.

The word isn't just "goodness," though that's part of it. The word *hesed* is God's abundance and harmony. It's having everything you need, and everyone else having everything they need, too. Isaiah described it as the wolf living with the lamb, and the leopard lying down with the kid, and the calf and the lion eating together, and a little child leading them.² Zechariah talks about each of God's people having their own vine and fig tree,³ each of God's people having enough without depending on anyone but God. That is what the house of God is like. That is the amazing goodness that the psalm is talking about here.

That goodness goes with mercy. You don't have to deserve this goodness. You've got it anyway.

Goodness and mercy aren't just following you. That's a weak translation. No, *hesed* and mercy are pursuing you! They're going to keep chasing you and trying to catch you as long as you keep running away. As long as you keep wandering away from God's plan, the GPS will keep saying, "Recalculating," and goodness and mercy will keep chasing you, until they catch you!

"and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

You will live in that kind of a world, filled with goodness and mercy forever. That is the future that the God who created you wants for you. And for all of God's other children.

Do you ever doubt that?

Do you ever feel doubt that God wants that kind of goodness and peace for all of us, or at least doubt that it's ever going to happen for you?

² Isaiah 11:6.

³ Zechariah 3:10.

No need to raise your hands. We will let what happens in the long dark night of the soul stay in that long dark night.

Knowing intellectually that what I'm saying is true is good, but it's not enough, is it?
When no one around you seems to understand, but you feel like crying?

When you're trying to act normal, but it feels like nothing will ever be normal again?

This is another reason that the Psalms were included in the Bible. Pray the lament psalms that we talked about last week, and pray this psalm.

Remind yourself that you have a shepherd. Remind yourself that God loves you and that God wants God's amazing goodness and mercy for you.

Because it is true.

If your neighbor needs a reminder, remind her. Remind him.

Because it is true.

And the more times you remind yourself of it, the easier it will be to live as though it is true.

Thanks be to Our Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

AMEN.