

“The Lord Is My Shepherd”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
May 7, 2017

**Psalm 23**

The most familiar psalm in the Bible. That would probably be an accurate description of Psalm 23. Whether we have grown up in the church our whole lives, or have had only marginal encounters with church, the words of this psalm are very familiar to each of us.

One of the most common times we hear Psalm 23 is at the time of death. For many of us, the last time we heard this psalm in worship was at a funeral. The minister reads it out loud, it is printed on the remembrance card, and it might even be on a flower arrangement at the gravesite. These words of comfort, peace and tranquility are especially pertinent during times of grief and loss.

Needless to say, I have read this psalm on those occasions more times than I would like to recount. I believe for many families, they select this psalm because it is what they have heard at past funerals. In the shock of death and grief, many families are unable to think as clearly or specifically about details of their loved one’s service. And so they instinctually recall Psalm 23, knowing that it is familiar, even traditional, for a time such as that.

I have to confess, though, that for me, because of this association with times of death, it can be hard to hear these words in a fresh way. I have read this psalm so much at funerals that my mind starts to think that this scripture is only appropriate for times of death. There can even be a monotony about hearing something so well-known – we assume we know what the words mean to us since we have heard them so often before.

Which is why I was surprised to see Psalm 23 appear as one of the lectionary texts for this Sunday in the season after Easter. Perhaps the folks who put the lectionary readings together decided it was important for us all to hear this familiar psalm not just as God’s Word to us at the end of life, but also as God’s Word to us throughout our lives. Words and phrases such as “still waters,” “comfort,” and “restores my soul” might be attractive to us because of the busyness of modern-day life. We rush and rush and rush, and we need these words of peace and tranquility, hearing God say to us, “Slow down, listen, and be still in my presence.” Indeed, Psalm 23 is a comprehensive statement of faith about God’s care and providence throughout our lives.

Consider for a moment the analogy the writer uses. If the writer is comparing himself to a sheep, then the Lord provides every need the sheep needs. To lie down in green pastures means to have the

necessary food and sustenance. To be led beside still waters means to have water for life. To be led in right paths means to stay on a path free from danger and safe to sustain life.

But a significant change happens in the middle of the psalm. Throughout these first three verses, God is spoken of in the third-person. But beginning in verse four, the psalmist no longer speaks of God distantly; he speaks directly to God. “You are with me, your rod and your staff – they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” It’s almost as if these affirmations of the first three verses are made personal, and the psalmist shares with us the depth of that faith in these petitions.

I wonder sometimes if we are truly able to hear these petitions of dependence on God. We are 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christians, and we are seduced by our culture into thinking that success is defined by being independent and self-made. When we are under stress, or feeling the pressure of work, school, family, and life, we are hesitant to admit that we cannot make it through the next day without help. Asking for help is seen as a sign of weakness, even a mark of impotence.

But the psalmist reminds us not only of who the Lord is and what God does, but also of who we are as God’s children. Jeff Paschal writes: *The psalmist proclaims the truth – none of us is “self-made.” None of us is strong and independent. We are God-made, utterly dependent upon God, as sheep are dependent upon the shepherd. Yes, we work, save, study, and plan, but God is ultimately the one who meets our needs. God is the one who makes us rest. God is the one who slows us down and restores our very being.*

*Then the psalm ends. “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” (23:6). The Hebrew here may be translated, “Surely goodness and mercy shall dog me all my life.” Imagine that. Every moment of life God is pursuing us, hounding us with goodness and kindness. What kind of God is this? The psalmist says this God is our shepherd, who grants our needs, causes us to rest and be restored, leads us in the right way of living, protects us from evil, honors and blesses us, and never stops pursuing us with goodness and kindness (Jeff Paschal, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 434).*

How does that feel? To know that you have a God who will dog you all your days with kindness and mercy? To know that on your worst and most stressful of days, God will hound you with protection and care? To know that no matter how much you struggle or doubt or question, God will never let go of you in love? Goodness and mercy shall not only follow us all our days; God’s love and care will pursue us to the ends of the earth, so we might always know we are forever in his loving care.

Craig Barnes writes: *I don't mind calling the Lord my Shepherd, but I've never been too flattered by being called one of his sheep. I had hoped to be the eagle of the Lord, or maybe the cunning tiger. Sheep aren't particularly smart. They scare easily, and have a knack for getting lost. Most of us don't look lost. We haven't fallen through society's cracks into homelessness and poverty. But David would say, "Oh no. It is you who have lost your way in a relationship that's offered more hurt than love, in a job that leaves you depleted and spent, or in the guilt of not being good enough, pretty enough or smart enough for someone whose judgment cuts deep."*

*Some of us have gotten lost in our battles against declining health. Others are lost in grief. And how many of us are just simply lost in our shame for things done and left undone? Trying so hard to find ourselves, we've even lost sight of who we are, who we were created to be.*

*The reason both the psalmist and Jesus spent so much time describing us as lost was not to judge us, but to help us find our salvation. Confessing that we are frightened and lost is the first step.*

*The key to discovering this salvation is seeing that "Thou art with me." That is how David survived the valley of the shadow of death when he was on the run from Saul, and it is the hope that rises out of the rubble of collapsed towers in New York. Believing God is with us is how relief workers made it through another day of caring for the homeless in Afghanistan, and how huddled Christians continue to worship in countries where the church is persecuted. It is even how middle-class Americans survive jobs they don't like but can't afford to leave because they need them to support lifestyles they don't really like . .*

*There it is again - the churning, disruptive experiences of a people who keep discovering that their only hope is in the Shepherd who is always the closest thing to them* (*The Christian Century*, February 13-20, 2002, p. 17).

"The Lord is my shepherd." That is our statement of faith this day, that in life and in death, we belong to God. As we journey along all the valleys of this world - whether they are dark or light - may we always believe and trust that our God is hounding us with goodness and mercy each and every day, as we dwell in the Lord's house our whole life long.

Thanks be to God. Amen.