

**Sermon - Proper 23, Year A)**  
**Psalm 23**  
**10/15/23**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is a story in the Eastern Orthodox tradition where a young monk is studying holy scripture. The young monk asks his teacher, “sir, what is the Bible?” And the teacher replies, “The Bible is the story of the whole world.” The student nods, and opens his Bible, and reads for awhile and he comes to a particularly strange book toward the middle and asks, “sir, what is the Book of Psalms?” And the teacher replies, “The Psalms are the song of the whole world.” The student nods and continues his reading, when he comes to a notably striking passage. “Sir,” he asks, “what is the twenty-third psalm?” And the teacher replies, “The Twenty-Third Psalm is the soul of the whole world.”

When I teach students myself - from the youngest children to the most seasoned adults - I hold up the Bible and I tell them that this – the entirety of this book – is a love letter from God to humanity. It is a long letter. It is occasionally a strange letter. But from the beginning of that “in the beginning” in Genesis to the final Revelation hymn of praise to Jesus Christ, the Bible is the unfolding of God’s enduring, capacious, life-giving and breathtaking love for us. It is limitless in its gifts. It is adventurous. It is rapturous. It is equal parts frustrating and brimming with impossible beauty. And all of this – from beginning to end – is found within the six elegant verses of Psalm 23.

We sometimes become a bit comfortable with Psalm 23, I think, with all of its ubiquity at funerals and in musical settings and in television shows. A person with no religious faith or instruction whatsoever might know it simply from the final chaotic scenes of the film *Titanic* or - maybe some of you - the lyrics of the hit 1995 hip hop masterpiece, “Gangster’s Paradise.”

But within this familiarity, the twenty-third psalm heralds a radical grace.

“The Lord is my shepherd.” The *Lord* is my shepherd. Here we find the proclamation that the God of the Universe – the almighty creator and source of all light and life – this is the One who is not distant or apart from us – but this all-powerful One is our *shepherd*. A shepherd is one who protects and soothes. A shepherd cares for the weak and knows the cry of the small. The creator of the universe is the one who tenderly stretches out his arms and holds us close to his heart. **And** – if the Lord is our shepherd, others are not. An earthly king is not our shepherd. A political figure is not our shepherd. Wealth and power are not our shepherd. Success is not our shepherd. It is only God who occupies this pride of place. The Lord is the one who leads us and loves us. Nothing more and nothing less.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.” Oh, how often I need to repeat those words. What power to repeat them: “I shall not be in want” – when absolutely every mechanism of modern life seems to be arranged so that we do not believe them. “Want” seems to be held up as the natural condition of the earth. We “want” so much. Even those of us surrounded by abundance are somehow shaped to understand that we are *lacking* something. But God tells us something else: He is enough. Always. Unconditionally. And the closer we look, as painful as it might be, the more we recognize that this is true. Growing in wisdom is sometimes like a limb that has fallen asleep being refreshed with blood– painful and strange but the only possible way to begin to move again. “I shall not be in want.”

“He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.” It is interesting to remember that most of the earliest readers of these verses lived in the desert. This was not a psalm written by the people of Vermont. In even the barren and dry places, this shepherd brings us to abundance. In even the darkest and most perilous seasons of our lives, this

shepherd walks us to the places of refreshment and grace. Because of course, that refreshment is the Lord himself. Jesus said, “let anyone who thirsts, come to me and drink.”

The psalm continues: “He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.” The word “revive” literally means “to live again.” A revival of the soul is a foretaste of the Resurrection. When the soul is revived, it is restored to wholeness. It is put back together. It is made to live again. This is the question of grief: “how am I to keep on living?” How am I to live again? Without this person? With this injury? With this tragedy? How am I to endure when something has broken and there is nothing and nobody capable of picking up the pieces? How am I to be - now? This psalm is God’s insistence: the Good Shepherd makes our soul to live again.

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; \*for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” This is the very center of the psalm and the very center of all of holy Scripture. God says, “I am with you.” In the third chapter of Exodus, God calls to Moses from the burning bush and says, “Moses, you will lead my people out of slavery in Egypt. You will free the people of Israel.” God himself calls out to Moses and Moses, deeply aware of his own failures, resists him. He protests. He says, “God I cannot do this. I am not strong enough. I am not eloquent. I am a failure. They will not listen to me.” And God - God does not say, “It’s okay, Moses, I will make you strong.” God does not say, “It’s okay, Moses, I will make you eloquent.” He does not say, “don’t worry, Moses, I will make sure everyone listens.” God says, “I will be with you.” This is what God has said to us since the beginning of time, and this is what God says to us now. “I will be with you.” In fact, God says this so perfectly and with such urgency that he says it with his own Son. Jesus, called Emmanuel - meaning, “God with us.” God has always been *with* us. And in Jesus Christ, God’s own sweet

Son, our perfect Shepherd, this *with-ness* is closer to us than our own breath. He is closer than bone, and blood, and bread. He is with us.

“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \* you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.” This verse is most commonly remembered in the King James version where the translation reads: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” There are two truths here, both equally remarkable. The first true thing is the magnitude of God’s provision even in the face of distress. Even in persecution or illness or grief or death itself, God spreads treasure before us, ripe for the feast. The second truth - and this one is much more potentially upsetting - is that while God spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies...the table is meant for the enemies too. The treasure, ripe for the feast, will belong to the ones we do not wish to find there.

Upsetting, yes, but with wisdom, we can see the comfort here. Remember the part about wisdom hurting a little - like a limb being revived after falling asleep? It is a good thing to know that the table is meant for all of us, even our enemies, because at some point in our own lives, we have been or we will be the enemy too. We will be the one who hurts another. We will be the one who has judged poorly or with hardness of heart. We will be the one who has stolen or lied or cheated or gossiped or turned away from someone’s need - we will sometimes be the enemy. And that table of treasure, ripe for the feast, will still be waiting for us.

“Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” Notice here what goodness and mercy are up to here. They are following you. You do not need to pursue them. You do not need to achieve them. You do not need to buy them or even find them at all. Goodness and mercy are following you. From the Hebrew, the word translated “follow” is actually best rendered as “pursue” - “Goodness and

mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life.” This sweetness is not something hidden that must be sought out as a prize, but is rather our condition. What would our lives be like if we remembered this? What if every morning we repeated these words in our hearts and homes, trusting that the delight and the great grace of existence would be on our heels throughout each day, leaping toward us like a joyful child or devoted puppy? Goodness, mercy, running after us always, pursuing us even and especially unto the valley of the shadow of death. What would our lives be like if we knew this to be true? And not just for one day, but no – the psalm assures us – this is God’s promise all the days of my life.

This is the best part. The 23rd Psalm is the soul of the whole world. This promise of our Good Shepherd is true. He leads us and pursues us, blesses us, provides for us, comforts us, and he welcomes us home.