

Emmaus Lutheran Church  
Sermon - Psalm 23  
3/22/20

Can you hear the words echoing in your mind and heart? *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.* This most familiar of psalms is one of the pieces of Scripture that a majority of Christians could recite by heart. Perhaps we wouldn't have the words exactly right, but we could get the gist of it. It is so familiar that some people say Psalm 23 is not simply a famous Bible passage, but the most famous poem ever written.

This famous Scripture has made its way into our communal consciousness. It has inspired songs, great works of art, and poetry. People use it in devotionals and stories, for example, this fable, which I found online:

There was once a Shakespearean actor who was known everywhere for his one-man shows of readings and recitations from the classics. He would always end his performance with a dramatic reading of Psalm 23. Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation—"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want"—the crowd would listen attentively. And then, at the conclusion of the Psalm, they would rise in thunderous applause in appreciation of the actor's incredible ability to bring the verse to life.

But one night, just before the actor was to offer his customary recital of Psalm 23, a young man from the audience spoke up. "Sir, do you mind if tonight I recite Psalm 23?" The actor was quite taken back by this unusual request, but he allowed the young man to come forward and stand front and center on the stage to recite the Psalm, knowing that the ability of this unskilled youth would be no match for his own talent.

With a soft voice, the young man began to recite the words of the Psalm. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by the young man's recitation that every eye was full of tears. Amazed by what he had heard, the actor said to the youth, "I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training—but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me, what is your

secret?" The young man quietly replied, "Well sir, you know the Psalm . . . I know the Shepherd."<sup>1</sup>

What did you think of that story? Did you roll your eyes a bit, thinking, "that was predictable?" Or was that just me? While you have to admit that this fable is a *bit* cheesy, it is written to be a feel-good hit, perhaps a bit like the poem "Footprints in the Sand," one that affirms that our relationship with God is important and transformative. This kind of story is meant to remind us that our faith *means* something.

The twenty-third psalm, referred to as a psalm of trust, is also often used at funerals. In times of sadness, the picture of the relationship between the psalmist and God provides us comfort. The psalmist gives us an image of God as a shepherd who is completely devoted to caring for his sheep. As long as the shepherd is present, his sheep feel comforted and secure. A good shepherd makes the sheep lie down in green pastures so that they are well-fed. He leads them to still waters—water that isn't rushing and dangerous for them—so that they can drink. His rod and staff give him tools to protect the sheep from wild beasts. He anoints their heads with oil which would protect them from pests. Confident in the Good Shepherd's care, the Psalmist expresses his trust so beautifully in the final verse: "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." As we mourn loved ones, it gives us comfort to think of them dwelling with the Good Shepherd in the house of the Lord.

It is well and good to read this psalm and come to a feeling of peace and comfort, knowing that we are in relationship with God. And yet, if we just focus on the beauty of the green pastures that the good shepherd brings us into, we miss something important. We forget where the Good Shepherd originally finds us and leads us out from—the valley of the shadow of death.

Professor Ralf Jacobsen writes that, "trust psalms are spoken *in the midst of dire crisis*. The psalms of trust regularly include metaphorical descriptions of the *crisis* in which the psalmist is stuck. In Psalm 23, the crisis is described as "the darkest valley" and "a table . . . in the presence of my enemies." The psalmist acknowledges that life is hard, that death is imminent, that he is experiencing fear. It is this reality that allows the words of Psalm 23 to be more than just a go-to, feel-good passage. It is a passage appropriate for times of fear and heartbreak. The

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<sup>1</sup> <http://csavocations.blogspot.com/2015/04/because-i-know-psalm-but-he-knows.html>

HBO series, *Band of Brothers*, shows an army chaplain reciting Psalm 23 on the battlefield with dying soldiers. During my time working as a chaplain at a hospital, I came into the room of a dying patient one day and saw a doctor that I knew was not religious reciting this psalm with the dying patient's family. Psalm 23 invites us to acknowledge not only that the good shepherd walks with us, but that the good shepherd is walking with us through some pretty scary times.

We find ourselves in some pretty scary times right now. Though our everyday lives in some ways seem fairly normal other than being at home more than usual, living in the time of a pandemic has us facing the shadow of death. And for so many people, the difficulty goes beyond simply fearing the health impact of the COVID-19. Students are losing out on classes, traditional experiences, and future opportunities. Even though some people say these things are not important in the face of a crisis, athletes and their fans, artists and their audiences, and so many other people have lost their ability to play, create, and connect. People who are losing their jobs or whose businesses are closing are seeing their lives collapse around them. Nothing is stable right now. Nothing is predictable. Many of us look around and do not see green pastures and still waters.

We *see* a world turned on its head. We *see* the shadow of the valley of death. But what we *know* is that the good shepherd does not simply exist in the green pastures, in the peaceful and comforting place—the house of the Lord. The good shepherd meets us in the midst of the chaos, in the discombobulation of life in a pandemic. We see this in the care and concern of our families, neighbors, and fellow church members. We feel this in moments when we can take deep breaths, still our hearts, and experience God's peace.

But whether or not we see this or feel this is not the point. Psalm 23 gives us the language of trust, words to recite in the middle of any dark valley in which we find ourselves. Psalm 23 points us to the promise of God, that God will be with us in the shadow of evening or the light of the morning. God is preparing a place for us. Living in a pandemic will not always be our reality. We will walk through it, this too shall pass. No matter what tomorrow brings, Psalm 23 reminds us that we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.