

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 10:22-30

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

May 8, 2022

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

This has been one of those weeks. One of those weeks that takes you from the depths of grief to the joy of possibilities. From painful loss to abundant thanksgiving. The kind of week that makes you take to heart the 23rd Psalm and the power of trusting that the Lord is indeed our Shepherd.

I didn't ask Howard's permission to use him as my sermon illustration this morning, but I am fairly certain he would approve. Because, if I have seen anyone live the 23rd Psalm it is Howard. His life has become for me and for so many of us, a beautiful example of what it means to believe with all your heart and mind and soul that you are held so lovingly by God.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

For those of you who don't know...Howard had a massive stroke a week and a half ago. The doctors held out little if any hope for recovery. Last week I gave Howard his last rites. He was unresponsive but when I held a small spoon to his mouth, he opened his mouth just enough to take the drop of wine. Without even being aware, Howard reached for God. He trusted his Shepherd.

The next day Howard started to speak. His words to me (as I told you all last week) were "I am so fortunate." Even in a place of such utter devastation and uncertainty, Howard expressed gratitude. And then each day, he was able to speak more and more. And then he could sit and then he could stand. Two days ago they cleared the blocked artery that had been the source of his stroke. Yesterday, Howard moved to a rehabilitation facility. (And, even had a mint julep to celebrate the Kentucky Derby!)

It would be easy for me to say that this was a miracle. But, I am not sure that is the right way to look at what has happened. I think a more accurate way to think about Howard's journey is a journey of deep trust in God's provision for his life. That is in all things, even in the depth of illness and uncertainty, he continued to give thanks, to express joy, to share love, and above all, to have faith that his life was held and cared for by God. *The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.*

Isn't that the promise of the 23rd Psalm? When we say the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, we are saying that we believe that no matter what we may face in this life that we are first and foremost putting our life in God's hands.

Think of the second verse of the Psalm...*He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.* This verse is so rich in meaning and describes something extremely important about *how* God cares for us. It gives us a tangible description of the Shepherd in active participation with our lives.

Think of it this way...When you see an animal resting in a pasture, what does that tell you? It tells you a couple of things. First, the animal isn't hungry. He has gotten enough food for the day. He doesn't have to look for food at this particular moment. His work is done. He has been provided for. That means he can lie down.

The second thing we learn is that the animal is safe. There are no threats, no predators lurking around. The water is calm. There is no bad weather to take shelter from. He can rest.

It is an image of provision and safety. That is what the shepherd does. Every day. In every situation. In our times of grief. In our times of uncertainty. In our frustrations and in our fears. God says...I am your shepherd and I have promised to provide for you and take care of you.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.

And then, the Psalmist writes - God revives our soul. I love that our souls revival comes after God's provision and safety. Because it is virtually impossible to revive something if you don't have the right resources to encourage new growth. We revive when we feel encouraged to do so, when we are cared for and cultivated. It's an active presence of God in our life breathing into us the promise of possibility. *He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.*

But we are also reminded in the Psalm that we will face adversity...*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.* We will have to walk uncharted territory. We will face illness, loss, anger, grief, depression, despair. At the same time, I have always appreciated this part of the Psalm because it tells the truth. It doesn't turn away from the hard things we face as human beings. But, it promises us that we will never, ever be alone. The Shepherd never leaves us. And, not only will we not be alone. And then we are told we will be abundantly cared for.

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. Think about it. This is what Howard has just experienced. An anointing, an abundant provision, a promise of hope, a reality of joy right in the midst of the darkest of journeys. That is the blessing.

The final verse in the Psalm is the key to understanding how the Shepherd is realized in our lives. The translation of this verse that you are probably most familiar with states...*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all of the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the*

Lord forever. That's the King James translation. Digging into the Greek, you find a much richer way to understand these words.

Our familiar word "*follow*" is better translated from the Greek as "*pursue*". As in surely goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me. That's an active, fearless, persistent kind of love that the Psalmist is talking about.

And, the word "*surely*", is thought to be better translated as "*only*" as in *only* goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me. Not the bad things in life, but the good and the gracious things.

And "*dwell*" is better translated as "*to return to*". So what we may eventually come to understand as we re-translate these familiar words is that the Lord who is our shepherd will give us this... "*only goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life and I will continually return over and over to the house of the Lord throughout my life.*"

I think the Good News is this...The good shepherd is part of our life long journey – through the dark valleys and the green pastures. It's a good shepherd who has promised to literally pursue us in our times of greatest need and in our times of beautiful joy.

In our Lenten Lunch series this year we did an indepth study of the 23rd Psalm. One of the assignments was to rewrite the Psalm in your own words. To write it as though it was written specifically for you so that it could truly become a personal mediation of trust and comfort and confidence in the loving reality of our God. I want to share one of those with you this morning but first, lets recite the 23rd Psalm together. We will use the King James Version. You probably know it by heart. And as you recite it, hear it written just for you.

23 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ 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.

And, this is George's version that he wrote in the form of a lovely Haiku. It sums the 23rd Psalm up so beautifully...

A sheep enfolded
by God's love and bountiful
protection—that's me.

Amen.