

Psalm 23

Hebrews 13:20-21

August 28, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE GREAT SHEPHERD OF THE SHEEP

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It's back to school time! For the past few weeks, teachers have been busy getting their classrooms ready for the return of their students. At some schools, pupils have been back in class for a couple of weeks. At other schools, tomorrow is the first day.

I doubt many of us have much first-hand experience with tending sheep, or shepherds in general, other than from visits to a petting zoo or hearing Luke's Christmas story. But, if you think about it, Psalm 23 can easily be adapted to a good description of what our teachers do. Here is Psalm 23 for Teachers as posted on the Wythe Presbyterian Facebook page:

*The Lord is my teacher, I shall not wander off.
You make me sit criss-cross applesauce for circle time.
You lead me by cool water fountains.
You restore my soul.
You lead me in tight hallways for your namesake.
Even though I walk through the darkest power outage,
I will fear no evil.
Your chalk and your stories, they comfort me.
You prepare a snack before me in the presence of my classmates.
You anoint my owies with ointment;
my juice cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all of my days,
and I shall dwell in the naproom of the Lord my whole life long.*

Think about all of thingsteachers do for their students, no matter how old the students are. All of those many, many details that make up a school year add up to one main goal: helping the student learn, achieve, and move ahead. Most of us don't have much first-hand experience with shepherds, but we certainly know what it means to care for someone else's needs so that person can blossom and flourish.

Listen to this version of the 23rd Psalm from The Living Bible:

*Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need!
He lets me rest in the meadow grass
and leads me beside the quiet streams.
He gives me new strength.
He helps me do what honors him the most.
Even when walking through the dark valley of death,
I will not be afraid,
for you are close beside me,
guarding, guiding all the way.
You provide delicious food for me
in the presence of my enemies.
You have welcomed me as your guest;
blessings overflow!
Your goodness and unfailing kindness
shall be with me all of my life,
and afterwards I will live with you forever
in your home.*

We're used to hearing the 23rd Psalm as a source of comfort, particularly in hard times. Over the years, so many families asked to have the 23rd Psalm read at their loved ones' funerals, I decided to make it a regular part of the service. The psalm is printed on the back of the bulletin and I invite the congregation to read or recite the psalm in unison. I notice that many folks don't even look at the written words. For many people, the words come from deep within us. The familiar words bring comfort in times of trouble and distress. They are like a soothing balm poured on a painful sore.

Toward the end of his very long life of almost 98 years, my grandfather lived in the Presbyterian Village retirement center near Atlanta. When he died, the staff held a memorial service for him. The residents and staff gathered in the common room. My grandfather's roommate was there, along with his hall neighbors and people who had come to know him as they visited their own family members. My mother was seated at the front. A nurse wheeled a woman in and parked her wheelchair next to my mother. The woman was in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's Disease. My mom was concerned about the woman and her ability to handle and comprehend what was going on in the service. She didn't remember my mother or seem to be aware of her surroundings.

But, as the minister began the memorial service, the woman became very quiet and attentive. When the minister invited the gathered people to join him in the 23rd Psalm, this woman in the wheelchair, who suffered so greatly and seemed so lost, led the group in the 23rd Psalm in a loud, clear, and strong voice. My mother said it was almost like a miracle. David's psalm seemed to bring her comfort and security. The familiar brought with it hope.

Familiarity, comfort, and hope. . . this is what we love about the 23rd Psalm, because it speaks to our personal concerns and anxieties. Yet, as personal as this psalm is, there is a real sense of community in these familiar words. Toward the end of the psalm, God is pictured as a host at a banquet, where the cup overflows and the host treats the guest with loving hospitality. In the early church, believers sang the 23rd Psalm as a newly baptized believer came from the baptismal font and went into the church to receive the Lord's Supper. The 23rd Psalm ends with the hope of living in the house of the Lord all the days of your life. But, you know, we don't go to the house of the Lord alone; we always go to the house of the Lord in community. In his commentary on the book of Psalms, Clint McCann writes, "If it's true, if indeed we are 'at home' in God's household, if the Lord is truly our shepherd, if God is really the only necessity of life, then the implications are profound and radical. We are not our own! We belong to God and God's household; we belong to one another."¹

Last Sunday we heard about Jesus being the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, "who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2) Today we hear about Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, whom God brought back from the dead. Most of the time, the New Testament talks about God "raising" Jesus from the dead, as in the "resurrection." Here at the end of the Letter to the Hebrews, we hear about the God of peace "who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus." That verb "brought back" means "to lead or to bring up." Here's how Tom Long highlights the importance of God "leading" Jesus from the dead. Notice the connection with how the Lord my shepherd leads me . . .

"So the Preacher's benediction actually speaks of the God 'who led up Jesus from the dead.' Jesus travels from the heavenly realm downward through time and space into the place of suffering, and then is 'led up' by God, holding fast to his brothers and sisters, and bringing them with him into the heavenly sanctuary . . . The picture of God 'leading up' Jesus from death flows into the accompanying image of Jesus leading his followers. The shepherd imagery, though not the Preacher's usual way of speaking,

does convey the idea of the faithful being led to the safety and nourishment of green pastures.”²

I know I’ve pointed this out many times, but something gets lost in translation in the Scriptures many times. For example, the pronoun “you” in English can mean you and you and you and you individually . . . or it can mean “all of you” as a group. You have to take your clue from the context, but even then you’re not always sure. Take our epistle lesson this morning. Listen for the word “you” and see if you can figure out who it means: “Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make **you** complete in everything good so that **you** may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight . . .” That final “us” gives you a hint that the “you’s” in these verses mean more than any one individual. [Actually the footnote in my study Bible says about that final “us,” “Other ancient authorities read *you*.”]

Now, I’m partial to “y’all” but I recognize not everyone here this morning grew up hearing and saying “y’all.” When the Preacher in Hebrews says “make **you** complete in everything good so that **you** may do his will,” he means, “y’all, youse, you guys, youse guys, you ‘uns, and yinz.” That’s right — however you say it, we’re back to the idea of the “communion of saints, the community of faith, the body of Christ.”

Each Sunday at the close of worship, I stand at the bottom of the chancel steps with a ruling elder and pronounce a charge and benediction, sometimes known as the “blessing and charge.” Here’s a formal description of the meaning and purpose of the charge and benediction: “Assured of God’s peace and blessing, we seek to follow Christ’s way, sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit. God calls the church to join the mission of Christ in service to the world. As we engage in that mission, we bear witness to God’s eternal reign. God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others. We go out to follow Jesus in the world — to show and tell the good news of God to everyone.”³ In other words, we follow Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, out into the world, for the express purpose of doing God’s will while God is at work among us doing that which is pleasing in his sight. What a wonderful partnership — the God of peace working among the flock under the leadership of the Great Shepherd whom he led back from the dead.

As we think about our calling as Jesus’s sheep, our place in the communion of saints and great cloud of witnesses, and God’s claim upon our life together to do his will and that which is pleasing in his sight, let us remember all that God provides for us and give thanks to God for giving us

the Great Shepherd of the sheep to lead us. Here's another version of the 23rd Psalm, from the New Living Translation, that reminds us of how God provides what we need all along our journey of faith.

The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need.

*He lets me rest in green meadows;
he leads me beside peaceful streams.*

He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,

I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.

You honor me by anointing my head with oil.

My cup overflows with blessings.

Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me

*all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.*

Let us pray: Good Shepherd, teach us to follow you and to be faithful to your calling in our lives so we may be complete in everything good and do God's will, through you and always to your glory. Amen.

NOTES

¹J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

²Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 146.

³Presbyterian Mission, "Blessing and Charge," at www.presbyterianmission.org.