

**John 10:1-17**

**Psalm 23 (Unison)**

**June 29, 2014**

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

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me lie down in green pastures;  
he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul;  
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
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.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil;  
my cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
and I will dwell in house of the Lord forever.

**Sermon**

***“A Summer in the Psalms”***  
**TO WIN HOME AT LAST**

***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.***

***Psalm 23 (The Message)***

God, my shepherd!  
I don't need a thing.  
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,  
you find me quiet pools to drink from.  
True to your word,  
you let me catch my breath  
and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through Death Valley,  
I'm not afraid  
when you walk at my side.  
Your trusty shepherd's crook  
makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner  
right in front of my enemies.  
You revive my drooping head;  
my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me  
every day of my life.  
I'm back home in the house of God  
for the rest of my life.

A number of years ago, Rev. Pete Carruthers died of a brain tumor. Pete was the associate pastor at the White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh. I didn't know Pete very well. I only met him a few times. He led a commissioning service for a group that traveled to Tabasco, Mexico, of which I was a member. Pete and I shared a mutual friend, who told me many stories about Pete. Our friend became Pete's driver as his illness progressed.

While he was on vacation in Florida with his family, Pete suffered some seizures. Visits to doctors and different tests revealed a very serious brain tumor. After he was diagnosed, Pete bravely battled the cancer for a couple of years.

I do remember the time Pete came to a meeting of New Hope Presbytery just a few months after his diagnosis. Although he was weak from his illness and treatments, Pete wanted to thank the members of presbytery for their concern and their prayers. He told us a story about an experience he had in the operating room as he was preparing to have a biopsy.

Pete said he was lying on the operating table, very scared, not sure what was going to happen. To comfort himself, he wanted to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. But he couldn't remember how the psalm started. His memory was playing tricks on him because of the tumor. He asked the anesthetist if he knew how the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm began. Pete told us an amazing thing happened. As the anesthetist began to say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . ." everyone in the operating room, doctors and nurses, joined Pete and the anesthetist in their prayer. Pete told us that he didn't know if everyone in the room believed — but the voices joined together gave him much needed strength in an especially difficult time.

### ***Psalm 23 (Good News Translation)***

The Lord is my shepherd;  
I have everything I need.

He lets me rest in fields of green grass  
and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.

He gives me new strength.  
He guides me in the right paths,  
as he has promised.

Even if I go through the deepest darkness,  
I will not be afraid, Lord,  
for you are with me.  
Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.

You prepare a banquet for me,  
where all my enemies can see me;  
you welcome me as an honored guest  
and fill my cup to the brim.

I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life;  
and your house will be my home as long as I live.

Each evening Monday - Thursday last week, our church and Fellowship Hall were filled with the sounds of children and adults enjoying Vacation Bible School 2014. One of the joys of VBS is watching the kids learn the Bible stories.

Several years ago at Bible School, I was given the job of telling the story of the 23rd Psalm to a group of approximately forty children on the last day of Bible School. The group members ranged in age from 3 years old to fourth grade. How was I supposed to get and keep them involved in telling and learning the psalm?

I racked my brains on Thursday night, trying to figure out how to get the point across in a way that might stick with the children. On Friday morning, as everyone was arriving, I pulled Jacob Hargrove aside and recruited him to be a shepherd, complete with a bathrobe costume and a wooden staff. His job was to lead the sheep to green grass and clean water in the Fellowship Hall. Of course, he was the only one who knew where to find the food. I told him the "sheep" wouldn't be able to understand anything he said to them.

Volunteers from the group of kids served as the sheepdogs and the wild animals who threatened the sheep. The rest of the children — as many as 35 or 40 — did a fantastic job of being sheep. They wandered aimlessly around the Fellowship Hall. They "baahed" and bumped into each other. They ignored Jacob's increasingly frustrated instructions. (Unbeknownst to Jacob, I had told the "sheep" to ignore what the shepherd tried to get them to do!) Jacob worked hard to herd those sheep toward the green grass and the water and to protect them from the wild animals that attacked the sheep on command. But the poor shepherd, Jacob, never could get all of those "sheep" moving in the same direction. He had his hands full! It reminded me of the classic Prayer of Confession: "We have erred and strayed from God's ways like lost sheep."

Because we so often wander aimlessly and “baah” and bump into each other and stray from God’s ways like lost sheep, isn’t it a comfort to hear Jesus say, “I am the good shepherd”? Isn’t it encouraging to hear God say, “I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out and I will make them lie down. I will seek the lost, I will bring back the strayed, I will bind up the injured, I will strengthen the weak, and I will feed them with justice.” (Ezekiel 34:11, 15-16)

### ***Psalm 23 (New Living Translation)***

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.

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 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, this woman in the wheelchair, who suffered so greatly and seemed so lost, led the group in the 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.

### ***Psalm 23 (The Jerusalem Bible)***

Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
In meadows of green grass he lets me lie.  
To the waters of repose he leads me;  
there he revives my soul.

He guides me by paths of virtue for the sake of his name.  
Though I pass through a gloomy valley,  
I fear no harm;  
beside me your rod and staff are there, to hearten me.

You prepare a table before me under the eyes of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil, my cup brims over.

Ah, how goodness and kindness pursue me,  
every day of my life;  
my home, the house of Yahweh, as long as I live!

Of all of David's psalms, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is probably the most familiar. When people are asked to read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in unison from the bulletin, I often notice that many people don't even look at the written words. The verses come from deep within us. A while back I decided always to include Psalm 23 as a unison reading as one of the Old Testament lessons in funerals and memorial services. The familiar words and images bring great comfort in times of trouble and distress. They are like a soothing balm poured on a painful sore.

## ***Psalm 23 (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.

An old Scottish preacher once said, "The Lord is my shepherd, and more than that, he has two fine collie dogs, Goodness and Mercy. With him before and them behind, even poor sinners like you and me can hope to win home at last."

May it be so, Lord, may it be so.

***Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, our good shepherd, in the waters of Baptism you give us birth, and at your table you nourish us with heavenly food. In your goodness and mercy, lead us along safe paths, beyond the terrors of evil and death, to the house of the Lord where we may rest securely in you forever. Amen.***