



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - April 13, 2008 "A Psalm for All Seasons"
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Psalm 23

¹ *A Psalm of David. 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. (KJV)*

John 10:22-30

²² *At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter,* ²³ *and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.* ²⁴ *So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."* ²⁵ *Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me;* ²⁶ *but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.* ²⁷ *My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.* ²⁸ *I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.* ²⁹ *What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.* ³⁰ *The Father and I are one." (NRSV)*

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters."

The words are worn so smooth with familiarity they can skip right across our consciousness without making an impression. Sometimes a little thought

even bubbles up, "Oh yeah, 23rd Psalm. I know that one" and then our mind drifts right back to its regularly-scheduled programming. But when our mind really attends to the ancient words, when their meaning does break through, what images rise up! Listen again:

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters."

It is surely the best loved of all the psalms – probably the best known of all Bible passages. It may even be the best known literary treasure in all human experience.

It was probably the first passage of Scripture you ever memorized; we still ask our third graders to memorize it for Children's Sunday. It is probably the last passage of Scripture you will ever hear in this life, for it is a cherished favorite at the bedside of the very sick. You might call it the "Alpha and Omega" of Scripture – God's promises quietly inscribed on your soul from the beginning to the end of life's journey. The 23rd Psalm *is* a psalm for all seasons.

Have you ever wondered why? Why this psalm has such an ageless appeal? The appeal to the young is obvious, isn't it? It is an irresistible psalm for springtime, for childhood. Lush, green pastures and still, cool waters are springtime images, and our third graders look like nothing so much as a flock of lambs as their teachers shepherd them up front to recite their psalm each spring.

Their young minds grasp easily, probably more easily than ours do, the absolute trust reposed in a Lord that is *my* shepherd – the natural gratitude inspired by a God who assures that we lack for nothing. The 23rd Psalm beautifully evokes and nurtures the hope, the joy, the flourish of life's springtime.

But, of course, there must be more to it than that. If the psalm promised nothing more than a life of lush spring fodder and well-watered repose, we would have long

since shelved it with “Jesus Loves Me” and “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep” – nostalgic remembrances of a simpler, more carefree season, mementos that we take back down now only to share with our children and grandchildren in the springtime of their lives.

By the time we have reached our own summers and falls, life has introduced us to a far more varied palette of experience. Oh, we still experience the bright, vivid greens and yellows and blues of springtime, but now we encounter darker, cloudier experiences as well. For almost all of us, midlife brings at least a share of spiritual doubt, despair, and suffering. Perhaps we mourn the untimely death of a parent or friend. Perhaps we struggle with a job that has grown stale and sour. Perhaps we grapple with old compulsions we cannot quite seem to shake. Or maybe we betray or have been betrayed by someone we love. And now we are ready to appreciate the psalm’s deeper gifts.

For me, that time first came in my thirties. I was trying to learn to meditate, hoping meditation might bring some relief, some peace, some consolation in a time of deep despair. I read about an ancient monastic technique called “holy reading.” The fancy name is “lectio divina.” You pick a passage of Scripture and read it very slowly – not for information, not for insight, not even to complete the passage. You just read quietly from one phrase to another until, as the monks say, one of the phrases “lights up” for you. They say that the phrase lights up because it has something to say to your soul. And so you put your Bible down and just hold that phrase in your mind, repeating it, turning it over and over, meditating on it as you breath easily in and out.

So, I pulled down the old Bible I’d been given in third grade, and after blowing the dust off of it, I turned to the only passage of Scripture I knew well, the 23rd Psalm, and began reading. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. . . .”

And there it was! “He restoreth my soul” lit right up. That’s what I hungered for. I wasn’t lacking material grass and water, I wanted a God who could, a God who would restore my soul.

That’s when I belatedly realized that the Psalmist hadn’t just written an ode to a carefree life. You don’t need God to restore your soul unless you have known what it’s like to lose your soul, what it’s like to have your soul wounded by life.

God’s Psalmist knew that, and he knew more. He knew what it was like to walk on when the soul was shadowed by death. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” And he knew what it was like when the soul feels besieged by adversities, by demons, by afflictions that rob the soul of its joy: ‘thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.’”

And God’s Psalmist had learned the greatest lesson of life’s summer and fall. He had learned that even when our souls are threatened and besieged – maybe *especially* when our souls are threatened and besieged – God, our shepherd, is there as well, to comfort, to guide, to restore our souls. The 23rd Psalm majestically inspires and reassures the courage and the renewal needed for life’s summer and fall.

Now, I can’t yet claim to speak from first hand experience about what God’s psalm has to say to us in the winter of our lives – although I’m getting there fast. But I have had glimpses, for one of the great privileges, perhaps the greatest privilege, of my calling is that you so often welcome me alongside as you navigate life’s last great transition. Let me share just three short vignettes of the psalm’s final gifts: three moments when the psalm blessed consolation into the final season of a life.

Here’s the first vignette: God’s psalm bringing comfort in a season of endurance. During my first year of ministry, I was calling on one of our parishioners living at Waveny, let’s call her Gladys. Gladys was in her nineties, confined to a wheelchair, arms bound helplessly to supports, deaf, and having a hard time seeing. And Gladys was angry, really angry. I would write questions for her in big letters so she could make them out. And no matter what I asked, Gladys would respond with eyes flashing. “Why hasn’t God taken me?” “Why won’t God let me die?” “What kind of God would leave me like this?”

I think you may safely conclude that I had no idea what to say to Gladys. Oh, I mean I had a bunch of “religiously correct” things to say, but my rookie minister thoughts seemed so superficial and thin in the

face of Gladys's prolonged suffering and searing candor.

As our time together drew to an end, I was sure I had brought no comfort into her day. I closed by asking Gladys if she would like me to read the 23rd Psalm. It was kind of a lame offer since I knew she wouldn't be able to hear the words, but Gladys nodded yes, and I began to read. I wasn't two lines into the psalm when I realized that Gladys was reciting the psalm along with me from memory. I watched her eyes as she reached the end, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." I am sure I saw Gladys's eyes soften and her hunched shoulders relax as she finished. God's psalm bringing comfort into a nursing home bedroom.

Here's the second vignette: God's psalm bringing peace for the final transition. My college roommate was in his last days of life, the end of a long siege of brain cancer. Johnny's wife, Marlene, called to tell me Johnny's time was near, and she asked me to come back over to their home after our Ash Wednesday service.

By the time I arrived, the hospice nurse had gone home for the day, and Johnny was unconscious, struggling for breath in the hospital bed they had set up in the living room. I read Scripture and prayed for peace, but Johnny, always a great athlete, was fighting on. Finally, after about an hour, Marlene and I each took one of his hands and prayed our way into the 23rd Psalm. As we ended the psalm, Marlene and I each felt a palpable little goodbye in Johnny's grip, and then he was gone. As Marlene and I looked up, there were tears in our eyes, but the tears reflected more gratitude than sorrow, gratitude for the overwhelming grace and beauty with which Johnny had slipped from this world into the next. God's Psalm bringing peace for life's last transition.

Here's the final vignette: God's psalm bringing consolation to those who mourn. A former law partner called to ask my help with his father's funeral. His dad had been a non-practicing Jew, and his mom had given up her Baptist tradition for the sake of the marriage. None of the children or grandchildren had ever been to either church or synagogue. And yet, they needed some form of ceremony, for the father

had been general counsel of a major international institution and there would be over 400 dignitaries gathering for his memorial service.

My old partner thought it would seem hypocritical to pretend the family had been religious, so he asked me to organize a "secular humanist" memorial service. Well, if you think about it for a second, you won't be too surprised to learn that you actually *can* find books and Web sites on "secular humanist" services, and I assembled a collection of templates and carried them down for a meeting with my partner and his mother.

As we shuffled through the papers and options together, the family was dutifully attentive. There's often a kind of numb focus on "to do lists" between a death and a funeral, but this meeting seemed even more listless, even more weighed down than most. Finally, I asked if I might read the 23rd Psalm for them as we sat around the table. I had no sooner finished the first line before I could see that the mother was quietly reciting the psalm along with me, all those years of Baptist practice welling up from deep inside. As I finished, she looked up with damp eyes and asked, "Do you suppose we could read that at the service?" And then, "What about Psalm 121?" And then, "What about the Lord's prayer?"

And so we continued into the night reading the great old treasures of Scripture to one another, occasional tears beginning to mingle with laughter as the family started telling stories about their husband and father. God's Psalm bringing comfort to mourners gathered around a kitchen table.

My friends, Psalm 23 *is* a psalm for all seasons: trust and gratitude for springtime; courage and renewal for summer and fall; comfort, peace and consolation for winter – all gifts inscribed on our souls by this psalm, from the beginning to the end of our life's journey.

Of course, like any metaphor, our metaphor of life's seasons has its limits. Few of us get through our springtime of youth without confronting wintry issues of diminution or death of a loved one. And all of us hope for springtime exuberance well into the winter of our lives. But perhaps this metaphor can help us locate our own souls on this particular spring morning.

I know, brothers and sisters, I know that many of you awoke this morning with souls buoyed with the hope and joy of life's spring – with a sense of exuberance as you reflect on the abundant pastures and waters all around you. May this psalm nudge you closer to the shepherd from whose hand *all* these blessings flow. May this psalm warm your hearts with a renewed sense of gratitude for the Lord who provides so that you do lack nothing.

And I know, brothers and sisters, I know, that some of you awoke this morning with souls besieged by the uncertainties or guilts or despairs of life's summer and fall. May this psalm reassure you, God promising through this psalm, that even now your good shepherd is searching for you, calling you by name, coming to guide you back to the fold, back to the green pasture, back to the still waters so He may restore your soul.

And finally, I know, brothers and sisters, I know that some of you awoke this morning bearing wintry anxiety for your own frailty or weighed down with grief for the loss of a loved one. May this psalm wing into your hearts bearing God's words of consolation: whispering that you need fear no evil, for God is with you, preparing a place for you, and all whom you love, to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.