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*For Uncertain Days*  
Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

There are so many reasons to simply read this psalm and not preach on it. The simple poetry of it needs little, if any, further explanation. As Carl Sandburg said of Robert Browning's poetry: "Here we needed no guidance from the professor—the poems themselves were enough."

While familiarity with this psalm can cause the reader to get so immersed in its pacing, rhythms, and cadences that the essence and power of it is often lost, we need to be reminded of this poem's great importance. Psalm 23 is profoundly personal and intimate. Most of the psalms are for the nation, underscoring the Jewish understanding of salvation—primarily for the nation. This psalm, however, sits up with the believer in the challenges of a sleepless night...stands close at hand on those uncertain days.

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff-  
they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
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.*

Some years ago, after hearing my Psychology of Religion Professor defend the power of scripture during difficult times, I began using the psalms as a point of focus while meditating. When I lived in Tampa, I often ran the wide, seven-

mile long sidewalk on Bayshore Boulevard near the church. The 103<sup>rd</sup> Psalm was one of those focal points: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not his benefits...”

Today’s psalm was another text that I used as a point of meditative focus. Near our home was a large circular park. On many early mornings and late evenings, I used the half-mile loop around the park for doing a six-mile run. Each time I completed a lap I would shift to the next phrase in the psalm-poem.

*The Lord is my shepherd...* What does it mean that God is like a shepherd to guide me? Am I paying attention to the Shepherd-God who is out in front of me? Do I genuinely trust God’s guidance? When have I gone my own way, rather than being sensitive to God’s leadership? How have I felt when I have followed this Good Shepherd, even when I initially questioned the direction I was being led...

*...He makes me lie down in green pastures...* This early morning run is a “green pasture” for me. I think about things here that I don’t or can’t think about when I am with other people, or in my office, or making hospital visits, or working on a sermon. I gain a certain kind of strength that I can’t gain even when reading scripture. God’s *green pastures* provide a rest and reflection I need to be emotionally and spiritually strong...

*...God restores my soul...*

*...God leads me in the right paths, leads me to do the right things, leads me to proper insight, leads me to make decisions that are the right ones even though they will not be popular at the time...*

The power of today’s lectionary Psalm is reflected in John’s gospel. It is a powerful metaphor for understanding the value of a personal relationship with God—a metaphor for understanding the power of the living presence of Jesus...a metaphor for understanding the power and guidance of the resurrected Christ.

As a senior in high school during a Beta Club Convention in Atlanta, my friend, Jimmy Dover, wanted to go hear Dr. Charles Allen preach at Grace United Methodist Church, the largest congregation in Georgia. Allen wrote a weekly column for the “Atlanta Journal” and the “Atlanta Constitution.” I later read his book, *God’s Psychiatry*. Charles Allen talked about the power of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and its ability to change a person’s life. He told an story about a distraught

and emotionally depleted businessman who came to him for pastoral counsel. His doctor had given him a medical prescription to “calm his nerves.” This pastor listened and gave him an additional prescription—“read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm five times a day for the next three weeks. Read it the first thing in the morning before dressing; read it after eating breakfast; read it during lunch; read it after dinner; and, read it just before you go to sleep.” The influence of this psalm on the person’s thinking, attitude, and living changed his life.

Allen said another person to whom he suggested this “prescription” wanted to know if it was okay to read the psalm five times in one sitting. She didn’t think she had time to read it at five different times during each day. A big dose of God one time a day or one time a week never brings transformation in a person’s life. It is living with an ongoing awareness of God’s presence and seeing that presence in the everything around you that makes a difference in your life.

This poem-psalm is loaded with imagery, and the more we learn about shepherds and their sheep...the more we can appreciate the metaphor. I vividly remember the first time I saw a middle-eastern shepherd in 1991 between the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem. Our vehicle stopped and this shepherd in ancient-looking clothing led his flock across the highway and on to greener pastures.

I watched my son, Ty, pour water for his dog, Blue—a half Siberian Huskie and half Golden Retriever. She got her name from her one blue eye. Ty, Jennifer, Blue, and I had climbed to the top of a mountain near Frisco, Colorado, that paralleled Buffalo Mountain, a 10,000 foot peak. A crevice in the rock on that mountain peak became the “cup” into which he poured water from his container. The water overflowed intentionally to provide clean surface water. As I watched, I thought of the psalm—“My cup over flows.” That practice is precisely where that phrase comes from. The shepherd used hewn cisterns or crevices in the rocks and poured fresh water into them until they overflowed forcing out any stagnant water left by his previous stop or another shepherd.

While this psalm could be the basis for a series of sermons, this morning I want to leave you with three important words this passage provides. The first word is *Shepherd*. It is a metaphor for describing the nature of God. In the Gospel of John’s text for today, he has Jesus offering a similar metaphor for himself: “I am the Good Shepherd...” In the middle-eastern setting, a shepherd has a name

for each sheep. He knows them by name and they recognize that name when the shepherd calls them. The shepherd loves his sheep. They are not just property for a livelihood. A deep bond exists between the shepherd and his sheep. The shepherd provides everything his sheep need. Psalm 20 speaks of God granting you your “heart’s desire,” which sounds similar to the phrase “I shall not want.” I once heard Carlyle Marney loosely translate the phrase, “give you your heart’s desire” to “God will fix your wanter.”

Like the shepherd, God never drives us; God only leads us. If you feel disconnected from God, I encourage you to look deep within yourself. Are your eyes wide open? Are you listening to the sounds around you? Is your heart receptive to your senses? The God I know never forces a person to do anything. He/She only leads.

A second important word is *lead*. The psalmist uses the word “lead” twice—“He leads me beside the still waters...He leads me in right paths.” Sheep are not good swimmers. The small hooves and heavy wool make them likely candidates for drowning in swifter currents. A good shepherd knows the weaknesses and fears of the sheep; he never exposes them to unnecessary danger. He never leads his sheep to water where the current is fast and the bank is steep. In the quiet, still waters, the sheep are calm and at peace.

The Shepherd also leads us in the right direction. The Spirit of God will lead us to do the right thing at the right time if our minds are focused on God.

The last word I want to hold up from this psalm is the personal pronoun, *My*. As I said at the beginning, the psalms are usually directed at the whole nation of Israel. This particular psalm has a very personal nature about it. While God is concerned for the world at large, God is also concerned for you. While God so loved the world, God also loves you personally. While the concern’s of Jesus were for his nation and people beyond it, Jesus’ concern was repeatedly for individuals as well—those who were discriminated against, those who were being treated unfairly, those who were weary, tired, discouraged, those who had lost hope, those who were looking for love in all the wrong places, those were seeking fulfillment unsuccessfully. He said, “I have come that you might have life—life’s in all its fullness.

And so may the words Jesus and the psalmist be ours this day. Amen.

**Psalm 23:1-6**

1The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
2He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
3he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.  
4Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff-  
they comfort me.  
5You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
6Surely 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.

**John 10:11-18**

11"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.  
12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the  
wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away-and the wolf snatches them  
and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not  
care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know  
me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life  
for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring  
them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one  
shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in  
order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own  
accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have  
received this command from my Father."