



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"Prepare a Table Before Me"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on October 1st, 2023, from Psalm 23*

After a shoot-out with the Oakland Police in 1968, one of top the leaders in the Black Panther Party, Eldridge Cleaver, fled in exile to Paris with his wife Kathleen and their two children. He desperately wanted to return to America, but his return meant facing betrayal and numerous charges. Huey Newton and Cleaver's other comrades in the party had all turned on him. The FBI either wanted him dead or in prison for murder and conspiracy. He could not go home without facing a long sentence, but he was becoming increasingly homesick and felt like a fugitive. The ultimate blow to his conscience came when his children now fully Francophiles, begged him to stop speaking English because it "hurt their ears." Eldridge fell into a deep depression, began having suicidal thoughts, and eventually decided he was going to act on them.

One evening in 1975, Eldridge was eating dinner with his family for what he believed would be the last supper. He had not revealed his intentions to them. He went to his private room where he sat on the balcony, with a pistol in his hand, and contemplated his death. For whatever reason, that night, his attention was drawn to the moon. Eldridge wrote, "I stared at the moon until I just crumbled and started crying. I fell to my knees, grabbing hold of the banister; and while I was shaking and crying uncontrollably, something manifested in my mind I had not thought about for decades; the 23rd Psalm. I started repeating the words and after a while I gained some control over my trembling and crying. I jumped up, ran, and got a Bible and I discovered my memory had not served me that well. I got lost somewhere between the Valley of the Shadow of Death and the overflowing cup."ⁱ

While praying the 23rd Psalm that night, Eldridge was overwhelmed with a spirit of peace and exhaustion. He put the gun down and fell asleep. When he woke the next morning, he felt recharged and completely reborn. He claimed, "I received a spiritual message that I must surrender to the authorities, go into that prison cell, and I come out the other side. I had no more fear. I just knew I would come out the other side." He told his wife what happened, and they began planning their return to America.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

When the trials and tribulations of life bring us to our knees what are the words that come to our minds and mouths? Is it not the words of the songs we have memorized? Like Eldridge Cleaver, for many of us the words that come in those moments of heaviness and hardship may very well be the 23rd Psalm. Part of the reason we're familiar with Psalm 23 is because it is the primary scripture read at most Protestant funerals. If we are at a memorial service, we take it as a given, we'll likely hear the 23rd Psalm. But there was a time in American history when no one cared for Psalm 23. Before the Civil War, it was not a popular psalm and very few had it memorized. It was not a suggested text for Methodist funeral ceremonies until 1916 and did not enter the *Book of Common Prayer's* service for the burial of the dead until 1979. It was not cited in the prayers or addresses at the funeral of Abraham Lincoln and did not appear in Memorial Day services until after 1870. It took two decades after the Civil War for the 23rd Psalm to take hold in American culture, but by 1898 it was being read at the funeral of every single soldier who died in the Spanish-American War.

The abolitionist minister Henry Ward Beecher almost singlehandedly caused this explosion of popularity. Beecher was the most famous preacher in America in the 1860s and in a glowing tribute he proclaimed, "the 23rd psalm is the nightingale of the psalms. It is a small homely feather, singing shyly out of obscurity; but O, it has filled the air of the whole world with melodious joy, greater than the heart can conceive. Blessed be the day on which that psalm was born." If that wasn't enough, he said, "It has charmed more griefs to rest than all the philosophy of the world. It has remanded to their dungeon more felon thoughts, more black doubts, more thieving sorrows, than there are sands on the seashore. It has comforted the noble host of the poor. It has sung courage to the army of the disappointed. It has poured balm and consolation into the heart of the sick, of captives in dungeons, of widows in their pinching griefs, of orphans in their loneliness.

Dying soldiers have died easier as it was read to them; ghastly hospitals have been illumined; it has visited the prisoner and broken his chains, and like Peter's angel, led him forth in imagination, and sung him back to his home again. It has made the dying slave freer than his master, and consoled those whom, dying he left behind...Nor is its work done! It will go singing to your children and my children, and to their children through generations of time, nor will it fold its wings till the last pilgrim is safe, and time ended; only then shall it fly back to the bosom of God, whence it issued, and sound on, mingled with all those sounds of celestial joy which make heavenly music forever."ⁱⁱ Just a little bit over the top, if you ask me.



The comfort Psalm 23 has provided people who found themselves in the valley of the shadow of death is extraordinary. But I fear that Henry Ward Beecher's words and the practice of reading it at funerals has pigeonholed Psalm 23 and prevented millions of us from tapping into its true spiritual power. We have so associated Psalm 23 with death that we have missed the fact that it is a song of life! Rodney Cooper tells the story of a young Black preacher and an old Black preacher who were sitting side by side one Sunday morning at church. The young preacher stood up, walked to the pulpit, and read Psalm 23. The congregation politely said "Amen." But then the old preacher stood up and read Psalm 23 again. This time the congregation shouted, wept, moaned, applauded, and yelled out a hearty "Amen" when he was finished. When the old preacher sat down, the young preacher asked him why the congregation responded with such emotion to his reading of the psalm. The old man answered, "Son, you read Psalm 23, but I read the 23rd Psalm. You can recite it, but I have lived it."ⁱⁱⁱ

What would it mean to live the 23rd Psalm? First and foremost, we must find a way to cut through the vague sentimentality that has grown up around this psalm and get real about its true power. My professor at Duke, Stanley Hauerwas, had a habit of saying, "The greatest enemy of Christianity is not atheism, but sentimentality. [Because] sentimentality is the name for the assumption that we can be kind without being truthful." I've heard Hauerwas make this point by claiming, "The reason why Christians argue so much about which hymn to sing, liturgy to follow, or way to worship is that the commandments teach us to believe that bad worship leads to bad ethics. You begin by singing some sappy, sentimental hymn, then you pray some pointless prayer, and the next thing you know you have murdered your best friend."^{iv}

Has our sentimentality suffocated the substance of psalm 23? One pre-eminent scholar of the Psalms believes the reason Psalm 23 has become a national treasure is because "it is short, easily memorized, and undemanding. It never mentions sin. It does not advocate joining a particular religious community. And it can be used in public contexts without offending anyone. Thus, it is the ideal spiritual text for a pluralistic culture."^v Another scholar writes that "virtually no Christian in the United States interprets Psalm 23 as a political tract, and no one expects to be instructed about the evil it condemns."^{vi} But perhaps the reason is because we have let our sentimentality suffocate the true substance of this psalm.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

To truly pray or sing the 23rd Psalm is to make three radical claims about God, the world, and us. It is a radical declaration of our reliance on, resilience in, and relationship with God. [Like a good Baptist preacher, I've got three points and a poem and then I'll sit down so we can have dinner.] To pray or sing Psalm 23 is to make the radical declaration that the God of life and love is someone we can rely on, who provides resilience, and longs to enter into relationship with us. And, in order for us to make the radical declaration of Psalm 23 that proclaims our desperately need to find our reliance on, resilience in, and relationship with God we must simultaneously declare that the world we live in today is bent on our domination, death, and destruction.

We all feel the beauty and comfort in the pastoral image of lying down in green pastures, being led beside still waters, having our souls restored, our lives returned to us, and directed down the right paths. There's nothing I want more at about 8:30 at night than to have my soul restored, my life returned to me. But when we declare, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" we are also saying God is our shepherd and no one else. We are saying that all the powers and principalities in our world who proclaim to provide for us and be our shepherds are not shepherds at all, but false shepherds, forces of tyranny and domination. To pray "God is my shepherd" is to pray that Amazon, Target, and SouthPark mall are not my shepherd. To pray "God is my shepherd" is to pray that capitalism, the free hand of the market, and conspicuous consumption are not my shepherd. It is to pray that money is not my shepherd. It is to pray that America, its politicians and would-be kings on the right and the left are not my shepherd. It is to pray that the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC, are not my shepherd. It is to pray that Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are not my shepherd.

Every power and principality in our world are trying to be our shepherd, claiming to provide for our needs. But if God is our shepherd, then the forces of tyranny in our world cannot be. This is what it means to rely on God, and if that's not a radical and political practice, then I don't know what is. I once heard a preacher say that if you want to know who your God is look no further than who you turn to when you find yourself in the valley of the shadow of death. Every one of us can remember a time when we found ourselves in the valley of shadows and death, grief and loss, pain and suffering, disappointment, and despair. Some of us are in the valley right now.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

I will never forget the sharp and intense pain I felt going through the valley of separation and divorce. I was crushed, devastated, lost. I didn't get down on my knees and pray Psalm 23, but I did the only thing I could think to do in those fragile hours, I called Joe Aldrich. Now you might think that means Joe is my God, but don't be ridiculous. Joe was the embodiment of God's presence in my life, the physical manifestation of God's comfort. He was the rod and the staff of the shepherd who showed up, sat on the couch, and cried with me. He was incarnation of God's loving presence in the midst of my bleakest valley of pain and loss.

To find resilience in life is to cling to the best of all promises, that God is with us and that God shows up in our heaviest and hardest moments in the flesh as our family and friends. In his extraordinary book on prayer, theologian Andrew Prevot writes, "God comes to meet us through the inescapable existentials [of everyday life,] which are therefore not merely givens of a world, but channels of divine excess that simultaneously disclose and hide a truly divine gift and giver. Prayer is the performative response to this coming to presence [of God] amid the gruesome history of this world and the pain of concrete existence. There can be no authentic prayer without the trembling silence, the terrifying scream, or the uncanny blending of the two which tears at the fabric of covenantal trust but also perhaps proves its immeasurable endurance. Prayer is that amorous inclination toward and volatile interaction with the freedom of God."^{vii}

When we pray or sing the 23rd Psalm we are declaring our reliance on, resilience in, and relationship with the God of life and love. And the relationship God offers to us, like any good relationship, revolves around a common table. As the indigenous poet laureate Joy Harjo famously wrote, "life begins and ends at a table."^{viii} But the table that God prepares for us in the valley of shadows—in a world bent on our domination, death, and destruction is not where we find relationship with God and each other. This table is not just a sign of the gifts God gives to us, but the gifts we're called to give to each other. When we pray or sing the words, "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." We are not just reciting the words of an ancient religion, we are pledging to make our community and our world like the table God prepares—a table of radical hospitality where enemies become friends, a table of anointing of the spirit of joy, a table of abundance where our cups overflow, a table of goodness and love, and a table of belonging where everyone feels that they are home.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

If we desire to not only pray and sing Psalm 23, but to be people who live the 23rd Psalm, then we must decide we will not allow the false shepherds of our world to lord over us. We will not allow forces of tyranny in our culture to dominate us. We will not allow the forces of death in the valley to consume us with fear or to overwhelm us with shadows of despair. We will not allow the forces of destruction in our world to divide us from God or each other. Instead, we must decide we will be people who find our reliance on, resilience in, and relationship with God and each. We must wake up every single day and decide all over again to make God our shepherd and nothing else, to become the embodiment of God's presence to each other in the midst of the valleys of suffering and death, and build a world for all people that looks like a table God has prepared before us—a world of radical hospitality, anointing and abundance, goodness and love, belonging and home.

This is what it means to celebrate World Communion Sunday. It is not just a time to pray for the unity and solidarity of all God's people. It is not just the time to hope that one day all the world will be one. It is the time to jettison the sentimentality that has suffocated the soul and substance of this psalm. It is time to reclaim the punch and the power of this song. It is the time to remember that the 23rd Psalm is more than a prayer—it is a pledge, a practice, a plan, a program, and a process of preparing tables that build beloved community and make God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. It is the time to renew the vows we've made. So let us pray and sing not just with our mouths, but with our lives "Yea though I walk in the valley of the shadow of domination, destruction, and death, I will fear no evil, instead I will live as if God is my shepherd, as if God is always with me, and as if God has called me each and every day to make the world into a table of love and belonging for all people."

ⁱ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Fire*, Word, 1978.

ⁱⁱ Henry Ward Beecher, *Life Thoughts*, 1858.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kevin Adams, *Finding Our Story in the Psalms*, 2011.

^{iv} Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular*, 1994.

^v William Holliday, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 1996.

^{vi} J. Clinton McCann, "Commentary on Psalm 23," *Working Preacher*, 2011.

^{vii} Andrew Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, 2015.

^{viii} Joy Harjo, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, 1994.