

Surely Goodness and Mercy

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman
Psalm 23
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Easter 4

One of the challenging and rewarding efforts of my internship year long ago was transitioning the congregation from the SBH (*Service Book and Hymnal*), also known as the “red book,” to the LBW (*Lutheran Book of Worship*), also known as the “green book.” Even though the two congregations I served, St. Paul and Trinity, didn’t want to be left out or fall behind the times, everyone did not welcome the new book.

But by the time my internship ended, the people were warming up and getting the hang of sharing the peace. The green book had new liturgy, and new hymns. Some, in time, became favorites, like “Lift High the Cross.”

One unusual editorial decision about the LBW is that the psalms of lament were left out. I guess whoever was in charge figured they are too depressing and that people didn’t like them and wouldn’t use them anyway!

These psalms are back in the ELW, the new red book.

Walter Brueggemann divides the psalms into three categories:

1. ORIENTATION: Life is well ordered and reliable: *Bless the Lord, O my soul, O Lord my God, you are very great.*
2. DISORIENTATION: Life is broken and chaotic; I have nowhere to go. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?*
3. And... REORIENTATION: Times of surprising grace new possibility, thanks and wonder... wow! Here I am. It is a new day. *The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*

The three go together like a three-legged stool. Leaving out the laments is like living in la la land.

The most beloved psalm of all is Psalm 23. It is a psalm of REORIENTATION, of confidence in the presence of the LORD.

Early in my first call, shortly after a committal service, I learned that people from a different Lutheran church in a neighboring community were discussing that the new pastor—meaning me—had read a different version of the 23rd Psalm.

I had read what was printed in the new *Occasional Service Book*! But it was different from what they were used to, and it was disorienting.

Death is, too. At the side of the grave, we need words we can count on. Some kind of reassurance of future. For ourselves, and for our dead loved ones. But assurance and reassurance are good to have all along the way.

Psalm 23 paints some of the loveliest and most comforting images in all of Scripture. There is much art of the Lord as a shepherd. Many of us grew up with sweet images of Jesus as a shepherd, holding a lost lamb. And some of you were members of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church.

But the imagery is more than sentimental. When the psalmist declares that “the LORD is my shepherd,” it is *political*.

In the olden days, kings were pictured as shepherds; they were to protect and provide for their people. Yet the Bible tells more than a few stories of their failures, as the people experienced suffering, fear, alienation, and aggression.

We, too, know of suffering, fear, alienation, and aggression. Sometimes in our own lives, and every day in the world. So, like people before us, we need this psalm. Psalm 23 *is* a psalm of REORIENTATION. It ends well, and we need that:

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. (23:6, NRSV)

In the old King James Version, we read:

I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever! (23:6b, KJV)

No wonder we wait for these words at the end . . .

The images of this psalm describe a journey that the LORD oversees and guides . . . through fields, water, and valleys. The rest in green pastures is temporary. Just a nap.

The pilgrim gets up and is guided to still waters.

I read that sheep are afraid of fast running water; they can get swept away. So, the Good Shepherd leads them to waters that are still and safe. Then on to right paths and through the valley.

And all of this ends with the familiar blessing, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” This could be translated, “Only goodness and steadfast love will *pursue* me”! Usually in the psalms it is enemies that chase down and pursue. Here it is divine goodness that comes after us.

And the closing, “I will dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long,” could read, “And I will *return to the LORD’s presence* my whole life long.” This ending makes a difference!

This psalm is for us today, people sitting here in April 2018. Living, breathing people, trying to figure out our next step. Right now.

“He leads me in right paths.” (23:3, NRSV)

The word used here for “path” is the same word used for the grooves for the wheels of an ox cart. So ... right paths ... walking with the LORD ... is finding our groove. The right groove is right relationship with the community and with God.¹

Jesus as the Good Shepherd made a path for us ... into right relationship with each other and with God. His journey and agenda, his work and words, threatened those in power. Thus, the cross.

We hope that if we do our best, make good decisions, pay attention, and pray that the pastures will be green, the waters will be still, and that our enemies will become friends. But the righteous groove does not always lead to Oz. Sometimes the right decision, the prayerful, loving move, leads us into the darkest valley. DISORIENTATION. Like the psalmist, we have our own insecurities and regrets, losses and tragedies. We long for something that seems far away.

The Germans have many wonderful words that are hard to translate into English. I love them. *Weltschmerz*: pain at the world’s evil. *Zeitgeist*: spirit of the times. *Schadenfreude*: happiness over someone’s misfortune.

Psalm 23 reminds me of one these German words: *fernweh*. *Fernweh* can be translated as “far sickness, a longing for a place you’ve never been.” Or being homesick for a place you’ve never been.

This longing could be for a real place that is green, lovely, peaceful, idyllic, and perfect. *Fernweh* conveys an element of possibility. What if I visited there? What if I lived there?

I remember an NPR segment where people were asked for real places that gave them this longing. They responded enthusiastically. The overwhelming responses were Scotland, Ireland, the UK, and Iceland.

Scotland, I know, is green, mysterious, and ancient! And as some of you may remember, I’ve traveled there a few times. But a different type of longing pulled me as I traveled in order to visit a son. Together with him, I absorbed the green, mysterious and ancient spaces.

Fernweh is longing to be connected to the future, to the mystery of life. *Fernweh* is longing for REORIENTATION!

There are lots of sheep in Scotland, but I don't remember seeing too many shepherds. The sheep seem to roam around with freedom and confidence, kind of like they're in charge. People wait for sheep. And these sheep are marked with brightly colored spray paint. Spots of green, pink, and blue.

We are not spray painted, but we have been marked with the sign of the Cross. Claimed as Beloved by the LORD of creation. We are sheep of the Good Shepherd. Part of a fold, a community. Cared for, counted in, comforted, and companioned.

The good grooves we are guided to and the right paths we stay on are not for our benefit only. Jesus said, "There are other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also." (John 10:16, NRSV)

We have our own journey—and our own longing. We are shepherded by goodness, welcomed by steadfast love. So, as we participate in REORIENTATION and share a vision of the future, we ourselves become shepherds.

Recently I read of an astonishing shepherd.² Theresa Kachindamoto is the senior chief and tribal ruler of the Dedza District in central Malawi. Malawi is a poor, land-locked country with 18 million people. Her most crucial official duty is to end illegal marriage of underage girls and send them back to school.

Chief Kachindamoto has zero tolerance. During her fourteen-year reign, she has terminated the marriages of approximately 2,600 child brides, helped the girls finish education, subsidized their schooling, and ensured that their offspring are cared for by grandparents or family members.

A young girl, orphaned at nine and sold by her brother for chickens at age twelve, was set free. Beatrice, a tiny sixteen-year-old with a toddler, who was given a divorce and opportunity to back to school said, "I am nervous and excited. I can start my life all over again."

The chief said to young Beatrice, "You must have a vision for your future."

Every year 15 million girls, 28 every minute, become child brides. Underneath this is extreme poverty, gender inequality, and lack of education. The chief accepts no excuses. She fires male sub-chiefs who refuse to support the ban. The powerful chief can't be everywhere across 545 villages, so she has built us a large network of female informers, known as "secret mothers," to ensure her rules are obeyed. A person who works in the capital said, "The chief has created a genius system for tackling child marriage from the ground up. It works because she has involved the whole community."

Some of the traditionalists say that the chief is abandoning culture. She says she is redefining culture. The name *Kachindamoto* means "don't mess with fire"!

Last November, the ELCA released the draft of a new social statement: *Women and Justice—One in Christ*. It's been in the works since 2012, and the church hopes to vote on it at the 2019 churchwide assembly.

In the meantime, we can study the draft and offer our responses, which are due back to the ELCA this coming fall. (Stay tuned for details on how you can be part of this.) Every age and time has to ask, “What does it look like to walk in the grooves of God’s goodness? How do we redefine culture?”

In the Social Statement draft we read, “We believe that the Holy Spirit is always at work, transforming and inspiring new ways of living in this world towards God’s promised, beloved and eternal community ... God’s intention—revealed in Scripture—is that all people flourish and have life abundant. We are broken and yet made new by grace through faith.”

Indeed!

The ancient psalm speaks to us with reassurance and hope. Goodness is ahead of us, already where we are planning to go, like Jesus going ahead of the disciples to Galilee.³ Opening doors. Making a way.

And Mercy—Steadfast Love—*Hesed*—backs us up. If goodness goes ahead of us and love has our back, lament cannot last! We are covered.

Right in the middle of the Psalm are the words, “You are with me” (23:4). YOU ARE WITH ME. In Hebrew, there are 26 words before these and 26 words after.

The LORD is not an object to be adored or a static presence to be revered. God acts on behalf of the people to make life better.⁴

Changes can be hard. Red books, green books, red books ... Thees and Thous ... traditions and transitions ... gender and generosity ... opportunity and orientation ... roles, relationships, and reorientation.

We long for the promised presence that is already here *Fernweh* ... We are guided into the grooves of grace ... We warm up and find new ways to share peace.

Amen.

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1. Joel LeMon, “Psalm 23 Commentary,” workingpreacher.org, April 22, 2018
 2. Abigail Haworth, “Hail to the Chief,” *Marie Claire*, April 2018
 3. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, p. 440
 4. Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*

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