

Goodness and Mercy

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

May 7, 2017

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year A

Psalm 23



To begin, I would like us to try something together. Without looking at your bulletin, I would like us to recite the 23rd Psalm, in the King James Version. You may think this is not something you can do, but I bet many of you may be surprised. And if you get lost along the way, just listen to the community around you, and they will bring you back home. (Recite 23rd psalm in KJV).

A warm blanket on a cold night. The embrace of an old friend after too much time apart. A long, slow walk on a sun-lit beach. Peace that passes all understanding. If there is a more beloved, more well-known passage of scripture, I don't know what it is.

I was standing in a circle surrounding the hospital bed of a woman, ninety-seven years old. In that circle were several generations of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The time of her death was approaching. At the end of my visit, she asked us to get in the circle around her bed. Once we were there, she asked if I would read the 23rd Psalm. I had not brought a Bible, I said. "We don't need a Bible for the 23rd Psalm," she said, with a look that conveyed I should know better.

So I did the only thing I could. "The Lord is my shepherd," I began, just as I did here. And soon, just as you did here, everyone around the bed joined in, in the King James Version of course, "I shall not want..." A sense of peace descended on the hospital room. Beneath the noise of the hospital shift change on the floor, you could make out the sounds of the pasture, the quiet waters, and the voice of the shepherd, guiding us all, especially this beloved one lying in the bed. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me..."

Not everyone knew every word. But when they stumbled, the circle kept going, carried them along, and soon enough they were back in the cadence, saying words kept deep in the grooves of who they were, generation after generation. When we reached the end, "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever..." she said, "Amen." We said "Amen." And as we bathed in peace, she looked up around the circle and said, "My cup runneth over."

I have recited this psalm with people preparing for surgery, with couples at a wedding, after the birth of babies, and at the graveside. People who may not have opened a Bible in years, or ever, will recognize these words.

There are two sides, however, to knowing something this beautiful this well. It is the sheer magnificence of it, the overwhelming peace it offers, and its familiarity that can cause us to miss the radical message at its core, one that brings not only comfort but challenge, a summons to orient our lives in ways that place trust in the reality the psalm proclaims – that because the Lord is our shepherd, we have everything we need.

One of you told me not long ago you believed there was no more difficult passage in scripture than the first verse of this psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not *want...*”

Henri Nouwen wrote, “As fearful people we are inclined to develop a mind-set that makes us say, ‘There’s not enough food for everyone, so I better be sure I save enough for myself in case of emergency,’ or, ‘There’s not enough knowledge for everyone to enjoy, so I better keep my knowledge to myself, so no one else will use it,’ or, ‘There’s not enough love to give to everybody, so I better keep my friends for myself to prevent others from taking them away from me.’ This is a scarcity mentality. It involves hoarding whatever we have, fearful that we won’t have enough to survive. The tragedy, however, is that what you cling to ends up rotting in your hands.”

The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything I need. Maybe this is tougher than we first thought. Maybe its familiarity has caused us to miss its invitation. Everything in this psalm points to our relationship to God as sheep to the shepherd. Sheep are completely dependent on the shepherd’s care. It is the shepherd who provides food – green pastures. It is the shepherd who leads us to the still waters from which we drink. It is the shepherd who guides us through the valley of the shadow of death and creates the peace that fears no evil. It is the shepherd who, in the face of all that frightens us, all we might call enemy, sets a table for us. It is only because of the abundance of the shepherd that our cup overflows. It is the shepherd’s goodness and mercy that follows and sustains us.

The sheep has “utter trust and confidence in the shepherd. The sheep is not frightened because the sheep is not alone, not autonomous, not required to fend for itself. “For thou art with me...” The glory of the psalm is the trust the psalmist places in this shepherd, a trust that frees him to live in the here and now, not in a fearful sense of lack, but with the assurance and joy that comes with knowing, “The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything I need.

Even though this psalm is in the first person and seems a deeply individual act of prayer, it is a call not just to individuals, but to communities.

I have a colleague who serves a church in a rural area of North Carolina. When he first came to that little Presbyterian church, there were no families with children. They started an after-school program, which proved popular among many low-income families who needed a safe and affordable (in this case, free) place for their children to go while they worked. The church itself was solidly middle class. The families being reached through this program were not. One Sunday morning, a mother arrived with her four children in tow. They had been coming to the after-school program, and the mother took seriously the invitation someone gave to her to come to church. As my friend describes it, these were the first children to grace the sanctuary in quite some time.

And from the behavior of the children, it was evident this might have been the first sanctuary they had ever graced, or worship they had ever attended. That decent and orderly Presbyterian church was fidgety; one of the smaller children kept getting out of the pew and taking off down the aisle. They talked and climbed and laughed and cried.

During the coffee time that followed worship downstairs, he was cornered by three long-time members. “Those children,” they said, “have eaten *all* the cookies.” It seems these members drew the line at cookies. “If they keep coming there will not be enough.”

The next day in his office, he was racking his brain, trying to think of how to handle the new visitors – who had said they would be back the next week – and the great cookie crisis they had brought in their wake. That’s when he heard Betsy calling out down the hallway. “Pastor! Pastor! Little help here!”

He walked out to the front door, which Betsy was propping with her foot, trying to carry three paper bags filled with packages of cookies. She had heard all the murmuring during coffee time. She told my friend, “That’s an easy fix. Got these two for one at Walmart. You tell me when they start running low and I will buy more. Plenty of cookies for everyone.”

My friend said the amazing thing about Betsy was not only that she did this, but the spirit in which she did it. She didn’t bad mouth the cookie grumblers. She didn’t begrudge the expense. She saw a need and responded out of an abundant and joyful heart. Betsy was convinced that if God called these children to be part of her church, her call was to welcome them generously and love them as her own. And she did.

I once heard a man at a church retreat say in a small group that he had always thought love was a limited resource. “I only had so much to give. I kept it small – myself and my family, a few close friends. So when my wife said we have to go to church, I said yes, but in my mind I was not going to love any of you. I didn’t think there was enough to go around. What God has taught me here is that love is not a limited resource. I know it is a cliché, but it is a cliché because it is true – the more love you give, the more you have to give. It doesn’t diminish. It grows.”

It is easy to lose our way, us sheep. Just listen to the news, and it is a drumbeat of “not enough.” It can begin to shape us, making it hard to hear the voice of the shepherd.

The most profound moment in this psalm for me is when the psalmist proclaims, “Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” When I took Hebrew for the first time, I learned that the Hebrew word can be translated, “pursue.” Goodness and mercy shall pursue me. Goodness and mercy are always on our heels. They are like the shepherd’s dogs, seeking us out when we lose our way, comforting us when we are in the valley of the shadow of death, prodding us awake when we are tempted to huddle in fear, thinking we don’t have enough, thinking we are not enough. Goodness and mercy. All the days of our lives. *All* the days. Do we have eyes to see?

Some days we do, and some days we don’t. But that doesn’t change the presence of the shepherd, and the goodness and mercy the shepherd sends to guide us home. Sometimes we may even forget the words of the psalm. When that happens, just listen for the voices of this community of love and goodness and mercy, saying them for you, until you find your place, back in the fold, your cup overflowing, because there is always enough for everyone.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...