

Rev. Jerry Deck  
Psalm 23

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Summer in the Psalms  
Psalm 23

I have met a lot of people over the last several months. While I'm decent at remembering folks I have to admit that there are times when I have forgotten that I'd met them. So I'll say, "Great to meet you," and they'll say, "Oh we've met before" and I'll have to say, "Of course, we have, good to see you again!" But I really enjoy getting to meet folks because it is a great reminder of just how many different kinds of people there are. Funny people, serious people, introverts, extroverts, people who have tons of energy and people who seem like there always on the brink of falling asleep (at least during the sermons).

I think the same can be said about the faith that folks have. There are all different kinds. There are some for whom their faith seems to come so easily. They see God everywhere they go and they can't imagine anyone ever wrestling with believing that God is alive. Then there are others who have clearly been smacked in the head by God and yet they still seem to struggle with actually believing that God is around at all. And then, and my guess is this is about 98% of us, there are those whose faith life wavers back and forth. Times when we see God clearly and it feels like life makes sense and other times when we feel like we are following God and yet it feels like he has turned his back on us.

I bring that up this morning because I think that one of the reasons why the psalms are so popular is because of the fact that they speak directly to this reality in which most of us live. There are certainly times when the psalmist has a remarkable faith that he longs to shout from the mountaintops. When he and God are hand in hand and nothing is impossible. Then there are times when we find the psalmist muttering in the valleys, sulking and wondering whether or not God even realizes he is alive.

There is an authenticity to the psalms that speaks to our souls and lets us know that we are not alone. If the Bible spoke of only the good times of faith and when things came easy then most of us would question just how truthful it was. And if there was no hope to be found in the scripture, if it didn't point to the hope that faith in God gives us, then it would perhaps, wonder what the point is. The psalms bathe us in reality, but in a reality that is rooted in the hope that God cares for us, God loves us and God has not and will not leave us alone. They are hopeful and personal, real and intimate. Which is why we are excited to spend time in them this summer and not just by reading it and having me or Scott expound on it, but by also allowing us to hear from others why these psalms have been so meaningful to them and how they have given hope and life to them in whatever situation they find themselves.

And we begin this series with, of course, the most famous of all of the psalms. This is a psalm that even the least of religious folks are probably familiar. Almost anyone who has gone to a funeral is familiar with the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. There is a poetry in this psalm that speaks to us even beyond its words, especially when we are suffering or in pain. And there is little question as to what the focus of this psalm is, as to what the central point is. Actually the central point, as you may know, is literally right in the center. In the Hebrew there are 26 words that come before this central phrase and 26 words that come after it. And that phrase which centers it all, of course, is “for thou art with me.” Everything that comes before and everything that comes after, is centered around the important truth that God is with us.

Because the reality is that so much of how we understand life, the things that happen to us in life (be they good or bad), one another and our world, is dependent on that most important question of whether or not one believes, whether or not you believe, that God is with you. It’s why, of course, this is such an important passage for those who are in the shadow of death, whether that be the death of a loved one, the death of a relationship or the death of dream. Whether we believe that God is with us will change how we understand these things and whether we allow them drown in our sorrow or find ways to grow in them.

It’s Father’s Day, of course, and so I figured I’d share something about my dad. My dad, much like my wife’s father, is a real tightwad. My dad delighted in, and still delights in, saving money. Growing up I was always embarrassed at how he would haggle with folks in order to get the best deal, though I have to say he was pretty good at it. Even today, he’ll go to nursery at Wal-mart at the end of the season and start bartering with the salespeople until he gets a remarkable deal on all the plants they have left.

My dad especially loved to get a good deal when it came to staying in hotels. When we were on family vacations we would always pass Holiday Inns that, back in the day, would boast something called “Holidomes”. Now my sister and I had no idea what those were, but we were certain we would love them. But we also knew there was no way we were ever going to get a chance to see the inside of a Holiday Inn or a Holidome. That was way too swanky for my father.

No, my father had a “10 cockroach minimum” when it came to hotels. If we walked into our hotel room and there were fewer than 10 cockroaches then my dad was certain that he had paid too much. So, not surprisingly, we stayed in some pretty scary and disgusting places. And as a kid this could cause a fair amount of fear. It wasn’t that big of a deal when we first got there or were going to sleep. It was when I woke up in the middle of the night. There’s just something that makes you feel so vulnerable in the middle of the night, isn’t there? Especially when you’re in a place you’re not familiar with and when you’re certain at any moment some sort of animal is going to run across your leg. I would just lie there in fear. I couldn’t see anything because of the dark curtains in our room. I couldn’t smell anything over the musty comforter at the foot of my bed. I couldn’t hear anything, except for beating of my

heart and the obnoxiously loud air conditioner. It was remarkably terrifying and eerily lonely.

And there was only one thing that could give me peace in the midst of the fear. It was if I knew that my dad was still in the room. Since I couldn't see him or smell him and I wasn't about to stand on the ground between our beds to try and touch him I would get as quiet as possible and listen for him. I would wait for the aforementioned air-conditioner to finally kick off for a moment and then I would listen with desperate ears. And what I was listening for was his breath. And when I finally heard him breathe, all of a sudden everything felt different. Sure, I still couldn't see anything. Sure the smell of the comforter was less than pleasant. Sure there were still bugs around me. But when I heard my dad breathe, I knew that I was not alone and that he was with me. Everything was different then, and before I knew it I felt a remarkable peace and once again I was at rest.

The reality is that knowing and believing and experiencing God in the midst of the shadow of death, in all its forms, changes how we see and understand the struggles that are around us. It doesn't mean that those struggles will instantly disappear, but it does mean that in the midst of them we are able to rest and be at peace, if we can but hear God's breath. That isn't always easy, of course, amidst the noisy world we live in, amidst the darkness that can be so prevalent, but in those moments our call is to listen, to listen desperately, for the breath of God, for God's Spirit. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me.

Interestingly enough, when it comes to the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm we end up pigeonholing it, if you will, to days like funerals. I say interesting because in many ways this is symbolic of how so many of us live our lives. Which is that we pay attention and start listening for God in difficult, life-changing times, and yet when things are going well, and in our day-to-day lives, we end up forgetting about God. Which is why it's important for us to see that this psalm is saying more than just "remember God is with us in the shadow of death and that will change how we understand things then", but is really saying, "remember God is with us in all times and this should change how we understand everything."

You see, the opening line that states, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," is not just a peaceful, tender statement about a shepherd taking care of his sheep. The shepherd in that day and age was symbolic for a king. And so the psalmist is boldly proclaiming, "The Lord is my King, and from him I receive everything that I need and want." When the psalmist says we lie down in green pastures and that the Lord is preparing a table for us, he is stating that our security, our food and drink that God provides is enough for us. And that is no small, unimportant statement, especially in our day and age. Because it is saying that our life, each and every day, revolves not around us and our desires, but around God and God's desires. And it means that our needs and wants are dictated, not by what we want or what our society tells us we want, but by what God wants. And believing that is no easy task in our day and age.

After nearly 6 months we have finally moved into our new home. We are remarkably excited to be in a place and, as you can imagine, the girls are delighted to have their toys back that they haven't seen in nearly half a year. We bought the house a couple of months ago, but were having some renovations done. We tore down a wall, tore out a ceiling, got all new floors and painted most of the house. By "we tore down, etc." I, of course, mean that we wrote the check for someone to do that. Now originally we were also going to have them renovate the kitchen, but when we got the estimate from the contractor we said, "You know, the kitchen's not that bad!"

And so we moved in and we absolutely love it. Everything is great and we are really quite satisfied. Until, that is, we go over to someone's house who has a nice kitchen or until we turn on the television to HGTV and watch someone's kitchen get renovated. All of sudden we start looking at our kitchen and thinking, "Man, this is horrible," and before you know it we start trying to figure out how in our budget we can make the kitchen renovation happen now. "The kids don't really have to have 3 meals a day" or "I think it would be interesting to see if we could go without electricity for a year." But of course, what do you think would happen if we went ahead now and did the kitchen reno? We'd be incredibly happy. Until, that is, we'd go over to a friend's house who has a nice master bedroom and we'd start thinking, "The kids did so well with 2 meals a day, maybe they could handle just one" or "Well, maybe we don't need running water." Now, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't have nice kitchens or master bedrooms, but I think it does point out the reality that our own wants and desires and that of the society in which we live are insatiable and can never be satisfied. And if we keep trying to fill them up then we will be always pursuing empty dreams and hopes.

Which is why the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm has to be dusted off on more than just funeral days, because it speaks to the importance of our daily being reminded that the God is with us, that our lives must be shaped around his kingdom and that he provides our needs and desires. In good times and difficult ones, the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm helps to shape us around the reality of the presence of the Lord which forces us to ask if we are living according to our own needs and desires or his.

And it seems to me that the way in which we are shaped like this comes not from continually reprimanding ourselves for losing sight of God or by never looking at people's kitchens, but instead by getting in the discipline of reading passages like the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm and asking, "How have I seen the Lord with me" and "How has he provided for me everything that I need?" Much like my quieting myself in the scary hotels when I was growing up, this often requires a willingness on our behalf to be still and to listen for how we have heard God breathe. There's a long-practiced spiritual discipline in our faith called "The Daily Examen" in which Christians, at the end of the day, will reflect on where they have seen God. It seems to me that perhaps something we can practice this week is to sit down each evening, quiet ourselves and read the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. And then ask ourselves or a spouse or family member or friend, how have we seen that God is with us, how have experienced his presence and his provision?

In so doing, sisters and brothers, I believe the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm will not only bring peace in troubled times, but guidance and hope in all times. May we know, with our hearts, minds and souls, that God is with us, and may that reality shape us more and more into a people who follow our shepherd, our savior, our God. May it be so. Amen.