

April 26, 2015

Psalm 23

A Psalm for Living

Pastor Sally May

Psalm 23 (RSV translation)

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;

² he makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil;

for thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff,

they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

thou anointest my head with oil,

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life;

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

for ever.

The 23rd Psalm is perhaps the best known text in the entire Bible. It is such a beautiful, prayer-ful, comforting text. No wonder it is most popularly heard at funerals and burials. Yet, as I read the text a little over a week ago, I realized how much it says about living. For me, the 23rd Psalm is a Psalm for the dying and for the living and for the life of the church.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

For me, this is a powerful sentence. Knowing that God is caring for us is enough. We want nothing more. Can you imagine not wanting? To not desire anything? We certainly don't live in a society that advocates not wanting. Everywhere we go we are told we need these clothes, or that car, or this cell phone. And we, like lost sheep, follow. Add to our material wants, we want better or different relationships, we want our health; to not have physical or mental illness or disability, we want to achieve, to be successful; we want our children to achieve and to be successful. Yet here, in this opening sentence when we say it, "The Lord is my shepherd, we shall not want," we remind ourselves that God, as our guide, our caretaker, our fellow traveler is enough; all that we want.

God makes me lie down in green pastures

When we allow God to be our shepherd, to direct, mold, and shape us – rest - and nourishment - are provided – Like manna in the wilderness.

Rest - Sabbath – The Hebrew word for Sabbath from shavat, Shabbat, literally means "to cease" or "to rest." Most of us are given little time or take little time to rest, to simply be: To see and lie in the green pastures all around us. To see the beauty in the world and how we are intrinsically linked. When we take the time to stop – to rest - we recognize the Holy Ground on which we depend for rest and for nourishment. And in the midst of green pastures we are surrounded by plenty. We need not worry. There is plenty with God.

God leads me beside still waters.

When I close my eyes I picture a quiet body of water reflecting the blue sky and the clouds. Simply visualizing such a place offers a taste of the refreshment faith in God leads us to. Water is a necessary element of life. We cannot live without it. It nourishes our bodies. Living water, the waters of baptism, is a necessary element of Christian faith. This water feeds our souls.

God restores my soul.

When we are exhausted, frustrated, burnt out, stressed with financial problems, health problems, relationship problems, the beauty, the joy, the abundance, the gift of life itself are lost on us. All that is good seems to

disappear from within and without. Trusting God's commandments and where God leads not only energizes and nourishes our bodies, but restores us to our true being. Letting go and letting God restores our souls.

God leads me in paths of righteousness.

To follow God leads us in right ways of doing, being, and living. God is Good, God is Love, God is Peace, God is Life, God is Spirit. To follow God is to experience all that is good.

For God's name sake

"For God's name sake" is to honor and share God's name. God leads us into right ways for God's name sake. God trusts those who claim God as their shepherd to be disciples, witnesses, and servants of God's goodness, love, peace, spirit, and life.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

There are many forms of death. Death of the body, death of the will, death of hope, death of life as God creates it. We all walk through the valleys of the shadows of death at various times in our lives. Those times when we walk in the valleys, they are the low points. Death, in all its varieties, can seem to be looming – only the shadow do we see. It can be frightening. It can be lonely. The psalmist reminds us that we are not alone. God is with us. And God has tools, rod and staff, to protect us, God's sheep. God is our protector and in that we find comfort and safety. Faith in God offers a sense of protection and comfort that provides strength and courage when we need it most.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

While I may see enemies, God sees community. As I shared last week, when we take the time to sit together at a table and share a meal our vision is restored. God wants us to be relationship with one another. God does the work of preparing the table – the invitation, through faith, is offered to all. May we both accept and extend God's invitation.

thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

We are beloved children of God. God, the Good Shepherd, anoints us. This sacred act symbolizes God's care for us, blessing us as sacred beings, and dedicating us to serve God. You are loved, you are wanted, you are needed. How can our cup not overflow? With Joy, with Faith, with Love.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;

The word “mercy” is translated from the Hebrew word *Hesed*. *Hesed* is a complex word to our human minds, it means so much. It surpasses all of our understanding. *Hesed* is all about relationship: Relationships between individuals and relationships to one another in a global sense recognizing all people as children of God;¹ therefore God is at the center. With faith in God as our shepherd we are offered lives of goodness and opportunities and expectations of right relationship with one another and with God.

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

I have always understood and read this to mean eternal life, life after death until now. I now notice that it is written “in the house of the Lord” The house of the Lord in Hebrew Scriptures is the Temple; for Christians, the house of the Lord, is the Church. “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

It is such a beautiful reminder that we, as First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ, individually and collectively are a part of a greater whole. We are in this place and in this time to live into, express, and share our faith. We do this through our involvement in worship, music, mission and outreach, Christian Education, Board and Committee work, care for the building, etc.

Yet we were not here first. Others have come before us. Every person who has entered this space has offered and influenced in some way, no matter how visible or invisible, the life of this church. And the same is true for everyone who walks into this space today to worship and to serve. You matter. And so it is for those who come in the future. There is great blessing in being a thread in the fabric of the life of this church in what has been, what it is, and what it shall be; trusting that the Lord is our shepherd and we shall not want.

Psalms 23 is for the dying and for the living. It offers comfort, peace, protection, hope, relationship, love, and faith all in the presence of God. All we need in our dying and in our grief. And all we need in our living.

¹ Freedman, David Noel, Editor, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 4* (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 378.