

## Sermon: “The Many Faces of Psalm 23”

Next to the Beatitudes, Psalm 23 may be the most familiar scripture any of us ever encounter. So in suggesting that there may be understandings of these cherished verses that we never thought of before, I may be leading with my chin. When something is as dear to us as is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, shifting to a new interpretation can raise eyebrows, maybe even hackles. But today, that's what we're going to attempt, and risk. Appreciating Psalm 23 anew.

So let's start by acknowledging the most common understanding in the present day, which is that Psalm 23 is soothing, healing, reassuring, scriptural balm. Something best applied to hearts that have been rubbed raw, especially by loss. Consequently, Psalm 23 is a staple of funerals, memorial services, graveside committals. I've lost count of the memorial services in which “The Lord is my shepherd...” is one of the most frequently requested readings, often echoed in the form of a sung solo or hymn.

So well known is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that it has become what is called “a secular icon” – in other words, it makes its appearance at solemn civil ceremonies that have little or no connection to religion. In these instances, its appeal is not only its familiarity, but its power. It seems that even “the pagans among us” find it hard to ignore the charms of this tribute to God above. Its lyrical beauty and simple, heartfelt phrases are able to pierce all the defenses and barriers that the world usually erects against religious expression. It captivates all with its childlike innocence and trust in a loving Shepherd Lord. So, yes, even the world at large can be warmed by Psalm 23, especially when facing terminal times.

Was it always this way? Probably not. The virtues of this psalm have been recognized as long as people have commented on scripture, which is a very long time indeed. But at least in the Christian era, Psalm 23 has not always held sway over the end-of-life. In fact there is much evidence that in the early centuries of the Church, this psalm was included in worship mainly in connection with baptisms and communion. In other words, it had strong associations with the beginning stages and ongoing life of Christians rather than with life's twilight.

Interpretation of particular phrases has changed as well. While we tend to focus on the personal touches, the pastoral images of these verses, the style in earlier centuries of the Church was to interpret scripture allegorically, figuratively. When the psalm speaks of lying down in green pastures, for example, church leaders told their congregations that the pastures they were being led to were the pages of scripture. The inviting “still waters” that the psalm mentions were understood to point to the baptismal pool into which prospective Christians might enter if found worthy.

So far I've been talking about the past, dominated by the institutional church's experience of Psalm 23. I'd like to talk for a couple minutes about this scripture right now, and its reception far outside the Western Church. The author, Philip Jenkins, is well known for his books and essays on the church in the Third World. Jenkins argues convincingly that the lesser developed

countries are where Christianity has the highest growth and the greatest potential. Jenkins is talking mainly about Africa and Asia, and he notes that scripture is received and interpreted quite differently in those locales than in the West.

Specifically, on the topic of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, Jenkins says that these beloved verses are heard by Christians in Africa and Asia not so much for their comforting tones, but as a political declaration of independence from the many brutal forces – governments, rebels, exploiters of all kinds – with which they must contend every day of their lives. So, says Jenkins, when Africans or Asians in these circumstances declare “The Lord is my Shepherd...” the thought racing through their minds is directed at the dictators, warlords, and kingpins who oppress them -- “The Lord is my shepherd...and you’re not.”

So, as Jenkins describes it, Psalm 23 is for many in emerging parts of the world a “political tract,” a defiant rejection of tyranny and evil.

And this is related to one more thing. We treasure these verses for their serenity and tranquility, for the promise they give of relief from life’s storms and wounds. Quite justifiably so. But many theologians and scholars point out that the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm through its long history has always had a subtext to it; that lying behind the appealing beauty of its word pictures is a grim and forbidding twin, a dopplegänger where green pastures, still waters, and a protective rod and staff are nowhere in sight.

That observation came to mind this week as I prepared this sermon in the midst of countless images of migrant groups moving northward to escape danger, poverty, and hopelessness in many parts of Central America.

One set of photos in particular caught my attention. It was a photo essay on what awaits migrants when they reach their destination, the processing and detention process associated with seeking asylum.

The writing accompanying the photos was remarkably even-handed, sympathizing not only with the tired and bewildered asylum-seekers, but also with those in to whose care they had been committed. Tired and bewildered would describe them as well. This wasn’t some partisan screed attempting to demonize either the migrants or the processing center staff. It was recognizing the humanity of both.

There was one photo that was especially striking. It showed half a dozen teenagers straining to reach through a small cut-out opening in a chain link fence to receive supplies from relief workers on the other side. Everything in this photo was the polar opposite of Psalm 23: The young boys and girls in this picture were not likely any time soon to lie down in green pastures. Their heads were not anointed with oil, but with sweat. From the desperation on their faces none of their cups was half-full, let alone overflowing.

Perhaps it is for people such as these that Psalm 23 was written. Yes, it was written as well for us who live in relative comfort, to come to our aid when shadows fall, as they surely do. But in trying to explore other dimensions of the psalm, what we may find is that Psalm 23 is not a poem to accompany death, but a hymn to inspire life. Life in all of its seasons and chapters, its peaks and its valleys, its triumphs and its injustices.

The one constant in all these circumstances being that, through the psalm's witness, we know there is a God who loves, that there is a Good Shepherd who gathers the scattered in, that there is a Spirit who whispers "life" even in its bleakest hours. These thoughts conjure up that famous Hebrew toast, l'chaim – to life. And that, for this morning, will serve as our amen.