

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 23

Sunday, July 12, 2020

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell

Rev. Emily Campbell

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for the peace of the summer. For opportunities to enjoy the beauty of your creation, we thank you and praise you. We pray that in this time of uncertainty that you would help us to cling to your grace. Speak to us today, we pray, through your word and Holy Spirit. We ask that in this time of worship that you would be glorified and that we would be brought into a deeper fellowship with you. Lord, please forgive us for the many ways that we fail to be mindful of your presence in our lives. We are quick to forget all that you have done, and we are slow to offer our thanks. We do thank you, dear God, for never forsaking us, for never leaving us, and for guiding us as our Shepherd always. Shepherd us now, we pray, closer to you. This we ask in Jesus's name. Amen.

Friends, today we start a new sermon series entitled Summer in the Psalms. As I mentioned in our service last week, the reason we are turning our attention to the Psalms at this time is because the Psalms offer us the opportunity to bring our every emotion before God. In these anxious days with the Covid virus it seemed that this was a welcome opportunity for us to hold on to. So today we begin our study of the Psalms with the most famous Psalm of them all. We turn our attention to the 23rd Psalm which begins "The Lord is my Shepherd", and it is not by chance that I sit here this morning in front of this Shepherd's [stained glass] window. We all, at times, need to be reminded that God is shepherding us through this life and through every challenge and joy in life.

Today, I have a particular challenge for you. I would like you to take on the challenge of reading the 23rd Psalm first thing when you get up in the morning and the last thing you look at before you go to bed each night. I would like you to do this throughout this time when we are fighting this pandemic. My hope, of course, is that in doing this you will memorize the Psalm. By memorizing the Psalm, you will remember that, at no time is God not holding on to you. As you hold on to the word of God, remember, in the morning and in the night, that God never lets you go. Let us listen now to God's word as we turn our attention to Psalm 23.

Rev. Mark Hovermale, reading of scripture:

Psalm 23, New King James Version A Psalm of David.

The LORD *is* my shepherd;

I shall not want.

²He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside the still waters.

³He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name's sake.

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

I will fear no evil;

For You *are* with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil;

My cup runs over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

All the days of my life;

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD

Forever.

Rev. Emily Campbell

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God. we ask that, in this time and in this place, your Holy Spirit would shepherd us closer to you. Free our minds from distractions, Lord, and help us to focus all that we are on all that *you* are. This, we pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

Friends, in this time of this global pandemic, if there was ever a time when we were in need of a Good Shepherd to guide us through this experience, it would be now. So, it is fitting that we turn our attention today to Psalm 23, that reminds us that the Lord truly is our Good Shepherd. This Psalm, originally written by King David after his own experience of darkness, is a celebration of God's faithfulness to us. In this Psalm as the Lord is likened to a Shepherd, we are, in a sense, likened to sheep. I know this idea does not always sit well with us. Sheep do not have the best reputation in the world. For those of you who grew up with sheep, you know, too well, perhaps, they are not the smartest creatures on the planet, but I do not think that's where the comparison comes from. I think the comparison to us as sheep comes more from the sheep's tendency to wander off, to get themselves in trouble. They need to be redirected and often cared for by a shepherd. In this way we are very like sheep, in need of some redirection and help at times, and Psalm 23 assures us that help is available to us.

What is surprising about this Psalm is the type of help God is providing for us. God says very clearly in this Psalm that “the Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters; he restores my soul.” God desires to lead us into experiences of rest, and isn't rest in short supply these days? Isn't rest the thing we all crave? The rest God provides for us is not only simply temporary experiences of rest, as we rest in God's presence, and are renewed in that, but God longs to lead us into deeper experiences of rest.

You know, last weekend over the 4th of July I had the opportunity to rest a while with my family and one thing we did together was take advantage of the opportunity on the Disney-plus channel to watch *Hamilton*, the musical, with the original cast. We really enjoyed doing that. One of my favorite songs from that musical, is “One Last Time”, sung by George Washington. He was longing for rest in that song, and this song is all about the last gift he would like to give the nation, which is the gift of succession. He was going to step down and allow someone else to take his place. He sings a Bible verse I was not familiar with, prior to that song, from Micah 4:4. He said that God makes a promise that “Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree and no one will make them afraid.” That was the vision that George Washington had, and that vision of rest from work and from war and from the demands of life is something that most of us can relate to. God longs to give us this deeper experience of rest, but that rest is not just a daily rest, it's not just a retirement rest. It is an eternal rest.

You know the words of the Psalm. It ends with, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever”. There is this amazing promise of eternal rest that our Good Shepherd longs to lead us to, but before we get to that eternal rest, our Good Shepherd desires to lead us *through* our every experience of darkness. Jim Skimins, the former minister here at this church, was the first person to really point out to me, in this passage, that word “*through*”. God desires to lead us *through* the darkness. It is never God's intention that we camp in the darkness or linger in the darkness or set up house in the darkness. It is always God's intention to move us through our challenging times and into something new and, hopefully, into a time of rest.

There is an author from Pittsburgh, Kenneth Wilson, whom I have enjoyed reading. He tells, within his autobiography, his story of growing up in Pittsburgh. He, like many, lived in one of those houses built into a hill, and it had four stories in total. As a child his bedroom was in that fourth-floor attic and he records how that distance from the first floor used to terrify him. The darkness of that area, the unexplained noises, all frightened him as a child, and when his father used to put him to bed, he would often say to Kenneth, “Would you rather I leave the light on for you during the night or would you rather I stay with you in the darkness?” Every single time Kenneth Wilson said, “Stay with me”. Although his father obviously did not stay all the time, our heavenly Father does! He offers to stay with us in the darkness the entire time, so we fear no evil, for God is with us; his rod and his staff, they comfort us.

God's word, God's Holy Spirit--they comfort us. We are never left to our own devices and God moves us through darkness into a time of rest. And in case you were wondering, God ably and thoroughly provides for our needs, even in times of darkness. The Psalm says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over". Well, two things should stand out to you about that passage. If you think it's strange that God is setting us a table in front of our enemies, it *is* strange, but God is reminding us, even there, that even when life is hard, even when we're facing trouble immediately in front of us, we still have a reason to rejoice because God is present with us. We have a reason to celebrate because God is with us in the midst of our trouble and "my Cup overflows" is this incredible reminder of the gracious provision of God. We will never be thirsty because God provides more than we could drink. God supplies our every need, and we can praise God, even in our darkness, for God's gracious provision.

Clearly, friends, God is a Good Shepherd and this Psalm, this famous Psalm, which has meant so much to so many people through the years, is a call for us ultimately to trust in God's loving care. I pray today that you will allow it to be a remedy for your fear. allow it to be a remedy for your anxious thoughts concerning the future. Let it speak to you in the morning; let it speak to you in the evening, because there's no place we can go in this life, no experience that we can go through, where God is not present and offering us the gift of His rest and refreshment, His presence, His guidance, His love and grace. Thanks be to God for being our Good Shepherd. The Lord truly is our Shepherd. We shall not be in want. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale

Let us pray. Lord, we come before you today, thankful you are indeed a Good Shepherd. We are thankful for the promises found in the scripture, and specifically in Psalm 23, about your faithfulness and that you will not only bring us rest, but you will be with us in tough times. We are thankful for these promises. We know right now, in our world and nation, there is much turbulence, disagreement and strife. Let us, as your church, seek to be your hands and feet in these troubled times. Let us be the voice of reconciliation of truth, of love, of grace, and mercy. We lift up the various ministries that are serving you in the midst of these times. We pray your protection and your grace to cover them. We pray for those who are hurting and grieving today and during this time, whether the loss of a loved one, loss of a job or of health. We pray your peace and mercy be on all, this day, who are hurting. We pray all these things in the name of your son Jesus Christ who taught us to pray, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Rev. Emily Campbell

Friends, as we go from here today, let us go, open to God's shepherding role in our lives. Allow God to lead you into rest. Allow God to lead you through the darkness and provide for all your needs. Allow God to safely lead you home.

And as we go from here at this time, may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you and on those whom you love, this day and forever more.
Amen