

Sermon

“No Matter Which Way We Turn”

September 29th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on 1st John 3:11, 16-24 and Psalm 23

SCRIPTURE:

1st John 3:11, 16-24

¹¹ For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. [NRSV]

Psalm 23

¹ 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 right paths for his name’s sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint 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 my whole life long. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Through the hearing and proclaiming of your word this day, O God, make peace in our hearts so that we may truly hear you and follow you, for it is in serving you that we experience your love first hand and we find life abundant. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord we pray, and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

Usually a Funeral Psalm

As some of you have heard me say before, I was once told by a good friend and mentor that any good funeral includes a reading of the 23rd Psalm, and I tend to agree with that because, after all, it's a cherished and well-remembered passage of scripture. It's comforting and reassuring because of all the images of God's provision, safety, and tenderness. And, as a result, not all, but most, of the funerals I've conducted over the years have included it. But, to pigeonhole Psalm 23 as primarily a passage of scripture to be read and be lifted up during times of death is to do this piece of God's Word a terrible disservice.

Because, you see, at its essence, the 23rd Psalm provides one of the clearest pictures of God's love for us—a love that we know and experience every single day of our lives just as much as we will know and enjoy it in the next life. And, so while it may seem different or out of place to use it as a primary preaching text in a Sunday worship service, we must seek opportunities to lift up Psalm 23 at other times throughout our lives other than just at the end. It's far too rich a portion of scripture to do anything other because, as with all passages of God's Word, the Holy Spirit is just waiting to communicate something new to us each time we read it. So I wonder what God's Word might teach us new today?

Read Psalm 23 Over Jesus Shoulder

Recently, I re-read a very refreshing perspective about this psalm, and it encouraged people of faith to read Psalm 23 “over Jesus' shoulder”—that beyond our awareness of how deeply popular and important this psalm has been in our churches and in our faith, we should be reminded that it functioned quite similarly in the synagogues of Jesus' day. I think it's absolutely fascinating to consider that as a person of faith himself, this beautiful prayer would have shaped and molded Jesus' prayer life, too. And, I so enjoy imagining how Jesus would have likely prayed this psalm when he needed reminding of God's love—of his Father's love—in both good times and bad times. It would have been familiar to him, and he would have been reading and savoring it long before any of his followers viewed him as the “Good Shepherd,” making correlations and drawing parallels between this “shepherd's psalm” and Jesus. In all reality, Jesus would have prayed this

prayer as someone who trusted God as his own shepherd—as someone who trusted God to be his lifelong leader and guide.

The Shepherd Motif

You see, the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) is full of images of a shepherding God because the shepherd motif was an easy way of helping people understand the concept of *the* God. Yes, shepherding is largely unfamiliar to us in modern times, but such images and references made lots of sense to ancient people because of how shepherding was such a familiar vocation to them. And, while we obviously still have farms and farmers these days, back in ancient times, God's people lived exclusively in an agricultural society, before fences were erected to contain grazing herds of animals. So in that type of culture, shepherds were essential.

Even more, shepherding was no easy task. As I've talked about in previous sermons, what we may perceive to be cute and fluffy animals from afar would have at different times been affectionate, stubborn, dependent, aimless, easily startled, frustratingly stupid, and always hungry creatures. They were prone to wander off and become more easily vulnerable, and beasts of prey like wolves, foxes, and jackals were always looking for an easy meal. So a good shepherd learned to be strong but not overpowering, patient but not timid, and gentle but not inattentive. They were skillful and compassionate workers who cared for their flocks. So I hope that it's not that difficult to see how and why shepherding metaphors were used to describe ancient gods and kings—especially *the* God, our loving God—the same God who *is* the King of Kings, Jesus the Christ.

God as Our Shepherd

In the gospel of John, Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18), and Christ-following people of faith have been superimposing Christ's image on the 23rd Psalm ever since. (hear these words again and think about Jesus ...)

¹ 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 right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

You know, you and I are prone to wander. We are prone to make mistakes and missteps. We are so often stubborn and needy. We need continued direction and guidance. None of us are superhuman. No one is above, or without, pain, loneliness, or times in life when we feel lost. We hurt and we struggle all the time. And, we are always especially in need of a merciful, forgiving, and loving God to lead us and guide us.

And, so we proclaim, “The Lord is my shepherd.” And, we remember the other words that describe our patient and caring and loving God—our God does lead, our God does restore, and our God does nurture. Our God is a strong, gentle, and personal shepherd with compassionate care. And, our God is never absent from us, not even in the darkest moments. Truly, no matter how dark things may seem at times in our lives, we cannot descend emotionally, mentally, spiritually, or even physically to a place so deep that God’s goodness and mercy haven’t already gone—in fact, especially at *those* times, God remains right beside us.

God’s Goodness and Mercy

And, right there is where we find the fine point of the matter about the 23rd Psalm ... because above all else, this shepherd’s psalm makes at least one thing perfectly clear—that God’s presence is absolutely constant, and God’s goodness and mercy are everywhere. They are constant companions—ahead of us, behind us, and right beside us. God’s goodness and mercy go ahead of us, and are in every single place we will go before we ever arrive there. And, God’s goodness and mercy follow us, always pursuing us from behind, chasing us down. And, God’s goodness and mercy are present beside us in every direction, no matter which way we turn. Think about how wonderful life truly is, or should be, knowing that we are sandwiched between God’s goodness and mercy, and that wherever we go, we bump into God’s grace!

So What?

So now what? Why is this important? How do we live more faithfully because of this knowledge of God as our loving shepherd?

Well, here’s what I suggest ... as we sit here on the last Sunday of September, waiting eagerly for cooler weather and the change of seasons—getting excited for

all that God has in store for us with Kimmy's arrival this coming week and all the faith-filled activities we will be part of over the next few months—let us remember and embrace the wonderful reality that Christmas and Easter both happened; that Christ came and lived among us; that Christ came and sacrificed his life to save us. And, that Christ came back and rose to free us—to free us to move about our lives as God's people—as the body of Christ—loving and serving the world.

And, that means we are now free to read scripture over Jesus' shoulder. And, that means we are free to see *all* of God's Word through the lens of Jesus Christ, and to see God's call and command to each of us come alive from the printed pages.

It means we are free to live deeply in Christ, as the writer of 1st John implores us today. And, it means we are free to be genuinely concerned and to think of others rather than just being most interested in ourselves. That means we are free to boldly and fearlessly obey God's commandment to love, which means we are free to practice real love rather than just giving it lip service. And, that means we are free to sing songs like “They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love” with integrity and purpose, and with excitement and energy, today and every day of our lives (as we will do at the end of this service 😊).

It also means we are free to stop condemning ourselves with debilitating self-criticism because God is greater than our worried hearts. And, it means we are free to be bold in another way—to be bold in our faith and to reach out our hands to touch the hands of those other people who need some sign of God's love in *their* lives. And, that means we are free to live deeply and surely in Christ because Christ lives in us, and surrounds us with his goodness and mercy all the days of our lives ... no matter which way we turn.

Thanks be to God. Amen.