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SERMON

Psalm 23: A Reflection

July 19, 2015

Rev. Elizabeth Thompson

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Sermon by

Rev. Elizabeth Denham Thompson

Sunday, July 19, 2015

In the past few weeks and months, several tragedies have occurred, often along racial lines. Murders of worshippers in a church in Charleston, murders of marines, numerous black churches burned across the country, death while “driving black”, political comments about Mexican “rapists” who supposedly are the majority of the illegal immigrants seeking asylum in the US. Many of us here today have had our own private difficulties, tragedies, and losses as well.

And yet we have also had some reminders that in the midst of the difficulties, changes and new life can happen. A Supreme Court decision to extend the rights of marriage to gays and lesbians across the country, a political decision to remove the Confederate battle flag from flying over the grounds of the South Carolina capitol, a courage award given to Caitlyn Jenner for coming out and claiming who she is as a public transgender woman, sad but deeply felt statements of forgiveness for the Mother Emmanuel church shooter from victim’s families, a sense that justice can happen as numerous guilty verdicts were read aloud in court this past week in response to the Aurora Theatre murderer, and joy that a small vessel aptly named New Horizons weighing about 50 pounds has traveled 9 ½ years over 5,132,420 km to bring us pictures of Pluto demonstrating how connected all of us really are.

Long before these events unfolded, I had reviewed the lectionary passages and realized that Psalm 23 was one of the choices for this week, and I jumped at it. It is a vibrant and familiar psalm that is often used, especially during difficult times in our lives, so it is a fitting passage today. Several of the Bible commentators note that the 23rd Psalm is one of the most well-loved and well-known psalms, and also rates as one of the top pieces of poetry or literature known across the world. It does not deny that bad things happen, or promise that God will prevent them. Nor does it call for direct revenge or ask God to smite the psalmist’s enemies, as do some other psalms, despite a little bit of a “ne-ne-a-boo-boo” with setting a table in front of one’s enemies. Rather it is called a psalm of trust or a psalm of confidenceⁱ that describes how the psalmist experienced life’s difficulties as well as resiliency, trusting in God’s presence in the midst of it all.

The psalms in general are frequently rendered with different translations, understandings, and responses that writers have given that carry the gist of what they believe the psalm is conveying. Psalm 23 is a particular favorite for this type of reflective writing. We are using some of those throughout the service today

So I wonder, what continues to draw us to this ancient text? One reason is the same as what draws us back to the Bible overall. It both challenges us to realize that “nearly everything about our human situation is new” - different languages, different culture, different political structures, different circumstances. And yet, as Rabbi David Wolpe writes in *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God*, “Everything is new—save the nature of human beings. There are no new kinds of tears: we cry the same tears as did David... People feel pain, joy, and hope as they did five hundred and three thousand years ago. The sacred texts speak to human beings, and human beings have not changed; they can learn from the struggles of others to find their way through life.”ⁱⁱ

And so the psalm opens with the line the psalmist wrote hundreds of years ago,
“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” *RSV*

The image of the shepherd is now a bit removed from us, although for most of the last three thousand years it was a familiar experience. At one church I worked in, a congregant became animated when we were discussing the pastoral care group as “shepherding the flock”. He did not like the assumption that he was some kind of a dumb sheep that needed to be tended.

However what may be more difficult for us is the idea that we shall not want. The Jewish Midrash, the historic collection of stories, teachings and dialogues with the Hebrew Scripture, teaches that “No one leaves this world with even half of his desires fulfilled.” So if we will not want, yet not even half of our desires are to be fulfilled, what do we do with this opening statement of faith?

Harold Kushner, a rabbi whose son died at age 3, and who is known for writing the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, has also written a book on the 23rd Psalm. In it, he discusses this dilemma.

“There is a part of me that wants to want ... that wants never to be satisfied with who I am and what I have achieved, that yearns to reach higher, to understand more, ... to share with others what life has taught me ... I believe that God has planted in every one of us the desire for more, the reluctance to settle with what we have and what we are...Our challenge is to want more of the right things. There is a part of me ... that yearns for a better world, a world without war, without fraud or violence, and refuses to accept the idea that this is the way it is, always has been, and always will be.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So rather than not wanting, or not having desires, more helpful ways to translate this word are ones that focus on gratitude for what has been given ...

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.” *TANAKH*^{iv}

“I am content.” *Opening To You*^v

“I have everything that I need.” *A Book of Psalms*^{vi}

And for those of you who are like that congregant, who don’t like the idea of being compared to a sheep,
“The Lord is my constant companion, There is no need that God cannot fulfill.” *Psalms Now*^{vii}

“Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

In grassy meadows he lets me lie.

By tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit.

He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name.” *New Jerusalem Bible*^{viii}

or as another rendition has it,

“The path that unwinds in the pattern of your name.”^{ix}

“Even if I were to walk in a ravine as dark as death

I should fear no danger, for you are at my side.

Your staff and your crook are there to soothe me.”^x

Darkness. Shadow of death. Deepest darkness. Years ago my husband, Phil, reminded me of his experience trying to teach our children that sometimes bad things could happen and that sometimes it was okay to be scared. He would quote that famous teacher, Yoda, who when Luke Skywalker said he wasn't afraid of the shadows that lurked within, responded "You will be. You will be."

It is clear that the psalmist knows something about pain, suffering, and difficulties. Although there is hope from the abiding companion, let us not move too quickly through this valley of darkness. Rabbi Wolpe tells us that darkness and night are key concepts in Judaism.

"Dark reduces to essences. Freed of vision, we see inside. Primary concerns emerge; much that seemed demanding and important is now a trick played by the light. Darkness is the black cape of the magician laid gently upon the world, until all that seemed certain vanishes, and we question comprehension itself."

The darkness is scary and confusing. We have all known people who have lost their way in the dark, and who sometimes get stuck there.

But there is hope in the darkness as well. Rabbi Wolpe continues, "We can then search in a new way. ... In the Jewish tradition, the world began with night. ... God is intimately tied to the night. Night is the original state out of which the cosmos in widening circles was born. ... We began as did the world, each of us in the dark, without the reassurance of a sun-spattered world. The depths night touches, the conflicts it evokes in us, produces the curious combination of fear, passion, intimacy, and mystery that is the Jewish God. In the greatest dark, the dark of Egypt, redemption occurs. In the ultimate night, that of the future, redemption is promised. God moves between the poles of night—danger and promise."^{xi}

So the psalmist writes about passing through the valley of the shadow of death, the "ravine as dark as death," "the valley of deepest darkness." It is only one line, and yet it connects with each of us who have walked our own valleys. It connects with our communities and world that have walked those valleys the past few weeks. But in the darkness we have been challenged to search in a new way. It is the birthplace of what is yet to be. And God moves with us between the poles of danger and promise, and we go through the valley to the other side. But ultimately, our strength must be tested in the light of day.

"You prepare a table before me under the eyes of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; my cup brims over.
Kindness and faithful love pursue me every day of my life.
I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come."^{xii}

Yes, we do have enemies and adversaries. Nan Merrill translates this passage, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of all my fears." So whether internal or external, the psalmist helps us to name that they exist. There are many things that oppose us. What are your fears? What or who seems to be in direct conflict with you? Who or what is attacking you?

Yet we continue to be called to trust, to move out into the light of day away from the valley of darkness, even when what "opposes" us is still facing us. We are asked to share the same space with them. Can you invite your fears to gather around the table with you? Can you allow God's abundance to overflow even with your adversaries standing around you?

Stop for a moment to realize what this passage is indicating. The psalmist is describing not only God's abundance, but is also describing the actions that we must take to receive it. God can prepare a table, but if I'm too scared to come to the table, then it does me no good. God can stand ready to anoint me—to bless me; but if I'm unwilling to receive the anointing, then I will remain unblessed. God can pour out life abundantly, but I must have an open cup to allow the love and care to enter and be delighted to let it splash over the edges without fear that there won't be enough to go around.

Rabbi Wolpe writes about this as well,

“The quality of the relationship is dependent upon both human beings and God. God cannot, alone and unaided, develop an intimate connection with individuals. The quality and depth of the relationship are finally the choice of the human partner. ... to be a friend, to be a lover, [to be a Shepherd], requires mutuality... It is not only in goodness, but in the infinite space that separates good from evil, the space of choice, that God can be found.”^{xiii}

Floating around the internet is this quote from Fred Rogers, better known as Mr. Rogers from PBS. "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world.”^{xiv}

Why does the 23rd Psalm continue to speak to us? Why do we continue to turn to it for comfort, for solace, for challenge, for redemption? Rabbi Wolpe concludes,

“Ultimately, we want to touch what God means in the most pained and private chambers of the human soul. Where anguish is greatest, the religious message is most significant. If God does not speak to suffering, to the shattered hearts of the psalmist's plea, then [God] must remain peripheral to our lives. That which does not touch my pain leaves me as I was. Even joy lasts and changes us only when it deepens our understanding and endurance of the pain that is part of living in an unredeemed world.”^{xv}

So it is by choosing to step into unknowable space, choosing the blessings, choosing to look for the helpers, choosing to care for our earth, choosing to be vulnerable, choosing to search in a new way, choosing to be blessed in the midst of adversity, and choosing to invite others into that space with us, that we discover we are being pursued by kindness, mercy and faithful love – all of our lives.

It is by our choosing that we will “dwell in the heart of the Beloved forever.” Amen.

Variations on Psalm 23

Used in July 19, 2015 worship service
Led by Rev. Elizabeth Denham Thompson

23rd Psalm – King James Version

**The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.**

Psalm 23 from *The Message*, translation by Eugene H. Peterson

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.
Even when the way goes through Death Valley,
I'm not afraid when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.
You serve me a six course dinner right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.
Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

Psalm 23 from *A Book of Psalms: Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew* by Stephen Mitchell

The Lord is my shepherd:
I have everything that I need.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters;
He refreshes my soul.
He guides me on the paths of righteousness,
So that I may serve him with love.
Though I walk through the darkest valley
Or stand in the shadow of death,
I am not afraid,
For you are always with me.
You spread a full table before me,
Even in times of great pain;
You feast me with your abundance
And honor me like a king,
Anointing my head with sweet oil,
Filling my cup to the brim.
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me
All the days of my life,
And I will live in God's radiance
Forever and ever.

Psalm 23 from *Opening To You: Zen inspired translation of the Psalms* by Norman Fischer

You are my shepherd, I am content
You lead me to rest in the sweet grasses
To lie down by the quiet waters
And I am refreshed.

You lead me down the right path
The path that unwinds in the pattern of your name.

And even if I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will not fear
For you are with me
Comforting me with your rod and your staff
Showing me each step.

You prepare a table for me
In the midst of my adversity
And moisten my head with oil.

Surely my cup is overflowing
And goodness and kindness will follow me
All the days of my life
And in the long days beyond
I will always live within your house.

“Day 19” from *Coming Out to God: Prayers for Lesbians and Gay Men, Their Families and Friends* by
Chris Glaser

Great Spirit,
Why do I keep myself
From your holy sanctuaries:
The hugs of ones who love me,
The inspiration of true fulfillment,
The grace of natural beauty,
The embrace of spiritual community?

Open my heart
That I may recognize these places
Of healing, of wholeness,
Of integrity, of growth,
For me.

Help me to transform
Or, if need be, abandon
Sources of alienation:
Bad relationships,
Unfulfilling activities,
Unhealthy environments,
Unsupportive community.

Open my eyes
That I may recognize places
Of wounding, of brokenness,
Of segregation, of stagnation
For me.

As I walk through the valley
Of these shadows of death,
Lead me to the green pastures
Beside still waters
By which you restore my soul.
Amen.

Psalm 23 from *Psalms Now* by Leslie Brandt (adapted using female gender)

The Lord is my constant companion.
There is no need that [She] cannot fulfill.
Whether Her course for me points
 To the mountaintops of glorious ecstasy
 Or to the valleys of human suffering,
She is by my side,
She is every present with me.
She is close beside me
 When I tread the dark streets of danger,
 And even when I flirt with death itself,
She will not leave me.
When the pain is severe,
 She is near to comfort.
When the burden is heavy,
 She is there to lean upon.
When depression darkens my soul,
 She touches me with eternal joy.
When I feel empty and alone,
 She fills the aching vacuum with Her power.
My security is in Her promise to be near to me always,
And in the knowledge that She will never let me go.
Amen.

“A Meditation on the Twenty-third Psalm” by Joanne Starks, from *Women’s Uncommon Prayers: Our Lives Revealed, Nurtured, Celebrated*, edited by Elizabeth Rankin Geitz, Marjorie A. Burke, and Ann Smith.

Lord, you are:
A companion to my spirit---
[Parent] and Shepherd of a life;
Perplexing at times for me.
Designing a purpose for me.

Fashioned in you,
I am in need of nothing
But the riches coming from
The depths of your love.

Lord, you are my Shepherd.
May your hands calm my rough waters
When I am tossed by swift currents
And
Fleeting wind.

May my soul be restored,
Healed,
Reconciled with my body,
Delighting in its abode.
May the focus of my eyes stay fixed
Upon images of your face in all of
Creation.

Lord, you are my Shepherd.
Anoint my head with you oil;
Bathe me with the sweet perfume
Of your Word.
Penetrate my spirit with your truths,
That I may reflect such
To a hungry world.

Fill my cup overflowing
With your presence,
That my heart may sing in jubilation
Songs of your unceasing love.

Lord, you are my Shepherd,
The bosom of your temple
Will be my dwelling place forever.
Lord, my Shepherd,
Blest am I, your sheep!

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- ⁱ Peter C. Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 1-50*, p. 203 ff.
- ⁱⁱ David J. Wolpe, *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God*, 1990 Penguin Books. P. 106-107.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Harold S. Kushner, *The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-third Psalm*, 2003 Anchor Books, pp. 35-36.
- ^{iv} TANAKH: Jewish Holy Scriptures, new JPS translation
- ^v Norman Fischer, *Opening To You: Zen Inspired Translation of the Psalms*, P. 34
- ^{vi} Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms: Selected & Adapted from the Hebrew*, p. 12-13.
- ^{vii} Leslie Brandt, *Psalms Now*, 1973 Concordia Publishing House. p. 38.
- ^{viii} New Jerusalem Bible
- ^{ix} Op cit, Fischer.
- ^x Op cit, New Jerusalem Bible.
- ^{xi} Op cit, Wolpe, p. 23-24.
- ^{xii} Op cit, New Jerusalem Bible.
- ^{xiii} Op cit, Wolpe, p. 64, 51.
- ^{xiv} http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/04/16/look_for_the_helpers_mister_rogers_quote_a_brief_history.html
- ^{xv} Op cit, Wolpe, p. 8.

A sermon is an oration, lecture, or talk by a member of a religious institution or clergy. Sermons address a Biblical, theological, religious, or moral topic, usually expounding on a type of belief, law or behavior within both past and present contexts. Elements of the sermon often include exposition, exhortation and practical application. In Christianity, a sermon is usually delivered in a place of worship from an elevated architectural feature, variously known as a pulpit, a lectern, or an ambo.