

## Sermons at St. Luke's

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, May 15, 2011.*

Fourth Sunday of Easter, 2011    Psalm 23

We just read together the 23rd Psalm which is probably the best known of the psalms, maybe even of all scripture. This psalm is a frequent choice at funerals, but I don't think it is only on the occasion of death that we need its words.

It can be dangerous for a preacher to take apart scripture that is as deeply engrained in folks as this psalm. We tend to think that because we have known it for so long and know it so well, that we know all there is about it. As we look into these familiar words together, may God speak to us as he has spoken to generations through these words.

'The Lord is my shepherd' A phrase so familiar .... so powerful. King David, who is considered the author of this psalm, is saying that the eternal God, creator of the Universe, is his personal shepherd. David could have said, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our shepherd" but he didn't; he says "the Lord is my shepherd." This is personal. This is a relationship with God. When I was a little girl, I remember being taught this psalm in Sunday school or Vacation Bible School. It's probably the first Bible verses I ever memorized. I remember how we held up our left hands and counted off the words "The Lord is my shepherd. "When we got to the fourth word, "my", we were supposed to grab that finger. 'My' is the ring finger, the love finger. the finger that leads to my heart. The Lord is MY shepherd. When I say this psalm even now, I find my right hand slowly moving toward the 4th finger of my left hand. The Lord is MY shepherd. I'm hanging on tight.

The Lord is my *shepherd* – God is our shepherd which means we are God's sheep. I love calling God my shepherd, but I'm not too flattered by being called one of his sheep. Sheep are not the brightest of God's creatures. I had hoped to be the leopard of the Lord or the gazelle of God. But when I think about it, the comparison of humans to sheep is really fairly accurate; we are more alike than we'd like to think. Just like sheep, we are prone to stray, we don't look ahead and we are often oblivious to the dangers that threaten us. Our history is the story of people straying from God, being forgiven and pulled back into right relationship with God again and again. We don't look ahead. We live for today, whether as a nation that cannot address the needs of the growing number of its hungry, homeless and hopeless, or as individuals who do not anticipate the effects of harsh words. Like the sheep, we are looking down, directly in front of ourselves at the next bite we are about to take and are not aware that we might be heading off a dangerous cliff. This is our life, my life. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." I need a shepherd, one who supplies all my needs. One writer put it this way, "what David means is that God's sheep never lack anything that the Shepherd thinks is good for them." God is all we need; Jesus is enough. When I let the Lord be my shepherd, I am not in want.

The next phrase is "he makes me lie down..." I like that. "He *makes* me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul." The first thing, David says, the shepherd does for us is that he makes us be quiet. He makes us be quiet and therefore our spirits, our souls, our inner selves can be restored. Don't raise your hand, but how many of you rushed to get to get somewhere at least once this past week? Does this sound familiar – you get up and rush to church; rush home to eat; rush out to a soccer game or a friend's birthday party; rush home to supervise homework; rush to do this and rush to do that. Then you fall into bed exhausted on Sunday night. Thank heavens for Monday when you can go back to work and get some rest! So much of our lives is a frantic rush. The antidote

for a frenetic, fast-lane life is this: God makes you lie down in green pastures; God leads you beside still waters. And God restores your soul in the stillness of water and the stillness of life. There is something wonderful about stillness. With body not moving, with mind not moving, with energy not moving. Stillness. There aren't many stillness enthusiasts in our culture. We can't hire a personal stillness trainer. We think, what's wrong with you, just lying around like that? You can't get anything done when you are still. Right? Wrong. God said, "Be still and know that I am God." In this stillness we feed in the green pastures; we absorb food for the soul. In the stillness we drink the water of God's spirit.

I need a shepherd who leads me all the journey through; who keeps me on the right path, the narrow path of right relationships. I need this kind of shepherd because I face the valley of the shadow of death. When my children were very young, I think they feared the nighttime shadows more than the actual darkness. Tree branches would cast spooky shadows on the walls of their rooms in the moonlight. Big shadows. Moving shadows. Scary shadows.

Fearing the shadows is not just a childhood experience. Shadows cross our lives in the form of disease, sorrow, regret, uncertainty, broken hearts. The shadows fall on us when all we have worked for, planned for, prepared for is taken away, whether through the wind of a tornado, the crush of sickness, or the blow of injury. But David says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, YOU are with me. You support me. You comfort me." A very important word here is "through". Even though I walk *through* the valley of darkness, God is with me. God will not leave us in the middle of this fearful deep darkness. Pain and sorrow will continue to be part of our lives, but they will end. The darkness is not dark to God. It is bright as the day. The centerpiece of Psalm 23 is not the shadow of death; we walk through it. The heart of David's message is the presence of God. "Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me". This is how David survived the valley of the shadow of death when he was on the run from Saul, and it is the hope that rises out of the rubble of tornadoes, earthquakes, and the overflowing banks of the Mississippi River. Believing God is with us is why we are working hard to send thousands of chemically treated mosquito nets to Africa to save the lives of countless children, and it is how brave Christians continue to worship in countries where the church is persecuted. It's how many of our neighbors survive as they search for jobs that will feed their families. God the shepherd walks beside us through the valley, calming our fear; God will chase away the shadows that dance on the walls of our hearts.

God is not only my shepherd; God is my host. The shepherd protects me from harm and guides me on the right path; the host welcomes me and gives me a good meal and fine accommodations. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over."

The battle rages; enemies approach. They sharpen their weapons and take aim. And what does God do? He fixes a meal for us. Right in the middle of the battle, right where the action is most dangerous. And not just a quick take-away snack – a sumptuous, bountiful meal with all the trimmings. The blessing of the Shepherd is not a total elimination of our problems. The blessing of the Shepherd is not the complete removal of our enemies. The blessing of the Shepherd is a table prepared in the presence of our enemies; the blessing is fellowship with God. We who follow Jesus Christ come to another table prepared just for us. A feast beside still waters; a feast that restores our souls; a feast where our cups run over. A feast where we celebrate the Christ who gave himself so that we might live.

The final promise of this psalm is that "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Our God has given us a home. The House of the Lord lacks for nothing. It is a place of abundance and beauty. In contrast to the parched places of our

lives, it is a place of vibrant and nourishing green pastures. In contrast our frantic and frazzled spirits, it is a place of still waters. God is our home. And the more we know that, really know that, and believe it in our heart of hearts, the more we will shift from anxiety to reassurance, from fear to fullness, from trepidation to thankfulness.

So even when we're not sure what the world will throw at us next, I offer this brief recap that we can say with conviction:

I may not be certain about what's going on in my life, but the Lord is my shepherd.

I may be struggling to make ends meet, but I will not lack.

I might have trouble sleeping because of everything that's going on, but God causes me to lie down in good pastures.

Floods and storms and disease may bring damage to life and limb, but God will lead me to still waters.

I might be beaten down and hurt and broken right now, but my soul will be restored.

I may not know where my next meal is coming from or what will keep the rain off my head, but I know God prepares a rich table for me and will always be my home.

So come to the table, the cups are brimming. The feast is prepared. Don't wait until the battle is over to sit down for the meal. The battle will never be over in this life. God is with us, and beside us and in us. The Lord is our host. The Lord is my shepherd. Amen.