

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

12th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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Text: Psalm 23

Title: “God Is Holding Your Life: Surely Goodness and Mercy”

Early this last week I read an article from the New York Times. The title caught my attention: “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape”. Given I consider myself a theologian—and you are too if you ever think about God-- I wanted to know what this was about.It’s been troubling me ever since.... Apparently, the so-called leaders of the Islamic State have convinced their fighters that they can--in good conscience--own women of conquered people as their slaves and that God approves of such practices. In fact, escaped eye witnesses--according to this report--all claim that the men pray before and after their unions with women they claim to own. It’s troubling and reflects a practice of people using scriptures to justify gratifying their own desires, much as good Christians in the south did when justifying slavery by quoting from the Bible.

It may be true, of course, that we live in the United States-- in Auburn or Midland or Bay City or Saginaw or Freeland—and may wonder what ISIS does in the Middle East have to do with us, but the article raises the question for all of us: what difference does it make what we believe? How does our understanding and experience of God really impact our lives and the lives of others? What difference does faith make anyway?

Let’s take a look at 23rd Psalm as we think about these questions. It’s one of the most—if not the most—beloved Psalm of all time. In fact, even people who aren’t connected with any church often recognize the first verse: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” It’s a psalm of comfort, confidence and trust in God’s ability to care for, to provide for, and be present with the psalmist. It’s a psalm read at most funeral services because of its comforting words and images.

Last Sunday I mentioned that Psalm 121 has been called “the Traveler’s Psalm” but Psalm 23, too, is about a person on a journey that God oversees and guides. As I listen, I imagine the psalmist lying down in a lush green pasture with wildflowers all around to rest, relax and refresh. It’s a time of Sabbath to have his soul restored. It’s a time and place to enjoy the gifts of God’s presence in creation and to let go of the demands and expectations that so preoccupy one’s time and mind. It’s a time and place to be at peace.

Yet, that rest is only temporary. The psalmist doesn’t stay in the pasture but moves on from there, walking beside the water, along paths and through valleys that have the potential to

raise fears. Having the shepherd along doesn't ensure there will be no dark times on this journey. There are valleys, and there is always the potential for fear to overcome, but the presence of the Shepherd invites confidence, even boldness, in the face of the dark times, knowing that the Shepherd is there ready with rod and staff to protect and defend, knowing the Shepherd can be trusted to provide what is needed to pass through such places of fear.

The Shepherd also leads the sheep to paths of righteousness. The Hebrew word for "path", *ma'galim*, is translated in other parts of the OT as "tracks" or even "ruts" that are made by the wheels of an ox-cart. When learning this from one biblical scholar, the image of the ruts of Roman chariots that can still be seen today in places like the ruins of Pompei came to mind. Worn into the stone by centuries of consistent travel, these ruts caught anyone traveling by chariot in its grooves. So the paths of righteousness are more like grooves in the stone and traveling in these paths of righteousness is like finding your groove. Yet, it's not just any groove but rather a righteous groove which means living in ways to be right and just and promote right relationships in the community and with God. And to live in this way is to glorify God as the psalmist prays, "for his name's sake." If we were translating this for the street, we might say that the psalmist is getting his groove on for God.

This righteous journey is motivated by more than just the need to keep moving: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." The psalmist again is on the move as goodness and mercy follow him. Again, a word study can deepen the meaning. The Hebrew word for "follow"—*radaph*—is in other psalms (7:1, 35:3, 143:3) translated as "pursuers", as in being pursued by an enemy and the word "surely"—*'aq*—can also be translated as "only", as in "only goodness and mercy will be chasing me down." It's as if God is in relentless pursuit of the psalmist offering only goodness and mercy. God just won't leave the psalmist alone.

I've told this story so many times I've lost track but every time Psalm 23 comes up, I think of Laurel White. She was 55 years old when she had a severe stroke. Comatose and lying on a gurney in the ER, her family had gathered round and the attending doc told them in her presence that this was very serious and that she could die. This is a great reminder of the fact that just because someone cannot communicate or doesn't even appear conscious does not mean they can't hear. Laurel heard every word, and she said when she heard the doctor tell her family she could die, she started to panic, thinking of her children and family, her junior high student whom she loved to teach. Her heart rate increased, which isn't a good thing for a stroke victim. But then in the midst of her panic, she heard a voice that went like this:

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ he restores my soul.^[a]

He leads me in right paths^[a]

for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,^[a]

I fear no evil;
for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

After her recovery, she reminded me several times that she learned this psalm as a child in her Lutheran church. It had by the grace of God saved her life as an adult as the voice of God spoke through this beloved prayer.

“Only goodness and mercy will be chasing me down.”

The journey continues with the last line of the psalm: “. . .and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever” or “I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” Some scholars claim that the word for “dwell”—*shuv*—is better understood in the simplest sense: “to turn” or “return”. And because this psalm is a prayer about life’s journey with God, the Shepherd, it makes sense to translate the verse in this way: “I will continually return to God’s presence, my whole life long”. That is, the journey doesn’t end at the end of the prayer. Instead, seeking the presence of God is a long-term journey that never ends. The psalmist returns to God again and again and again.

Of course, as Christ followers, this psalm images for us the Savior, Jesus, the Good Shepherd of John 10. Jesus is the trailblazer of the paths of righteousness whose groves lead him not directly from the green pastures to the house of the Lord but rather through dark valleys and eventually to the cross. As the Good Shepherd Jesus tends us and guides us into right relationship with each other and with God.

So whenever I begin to feel discouraged or saddened by the reports that the Christian church and mainline denominations in particular are declining, and I feel uncertain about what it all means for the future of the faith and then I read an article about people using their scriptures to justify committing evil, abusive offenses against other human beings-- my neighbors and yours!--I can feel my spine stiffen up and deep inner convictions rise to the fore! Do you know what I mean? Because the God I know and love in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is nothing like the so-called god of ISIS who condones the overpowering and humiliation of vulnerable people. The God I know and love in Jesus Christ teaches us to love enemies and pray for those who persecute us. The God I know and love chooses the cross rather than inflicting violent harm on those with whom he disagrees. That is the image we have of the Good Shepherd God who travels with us on our life journeys. So now, you tell me: does it really make a difference what we believe about God--does our faith really make an impact in the life of the world? Do we live through our lives as if goodness and mercy are chasing us down, relentlessly pursuing us? Does your faith—and mine--in Jesus Christ take you to the grooves of righteousness in which our behaviors toward others glorify God for his name’s sake?