

**“The Shepherd’s Voice” based on Psalm 23 and John 10:22-31**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on May 8, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

*The Lord is my shepherd, I will not be in need.  
He causes me to stretch out in green pastures.  
He leads me beside restful waters. He returns my whole self.  
He pulls me along in the paths of justice for the sake of His name.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will not fear what is evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You have anointed my head with oil. My cup overflows.  
Indeed, goodness and faithful loving kindness will pursue me all the days of my life,  
And I will abide in the house of the Lord for all time.*

Above is an unfamiliar translation of Psalm 23. This is what was read in the service. I had made the decision early in the week to translate this familiar verse freshly, because there is so much in this text that we miss, simply because it is so familiar.

You see, today’s texts are about comfort, but not about being comfortable. They are about comfort, but in the midst discomfort. They offer the comfort of God as our shepherd to lead us, but also, this comfort is offered in the places where we recognize that we need that voice, where we need our shepherd to lead us through.

Personally, I think it is important to read different translations of scripture regularly. It’s not that God’s word changes, but unfortunately, languages do evolve, especially English, and key words in scripture, well those words tend to evolve the most over time. It’s important to remember that the only authoritative version of scripture, is not the King James, but the New Testament in Koine Greek, and the Old Testament in Ancient Hebrew and Aramaic. And these languages had their own context, so we need to go back to that time and place, in order to understand scripture in our time and place.

Now, not everyone can learn Greek and Hebrew, but when we read different translations, we are forced to contend with the words on the page, rather than our own thoughts. Scientists have found that habits are handled in a special part of our brains, and when something becomes habit, this portion of our brain takes it over. This allows the rest of our brain to multi-task and do other things. This is why, once you have mastery of a particular skill, you can do it, while also learning something new. I think of the many people who knit or crochet, when they watch TV or are in church, and they say they tend to pay attention better, doing what for them is a mindless task.

As a point of fact, it seems reading or hearing scripture can be this way for us as well. When we hear that Psalm 23 version we memorized as a child, our minds can wander, even as we recite each and every word, because it is in that habit part of the brain. My mother after her stroke was unable to say more than about nine words, unless we said the Lord’s Prayer with her, which she could recite. It was coming from that habit portion of her brain.

We can remember our childhood, the good times, and be comforted in that habit zone. But when that habit part gets jolted – when it is not as it should be – We are forced to contend with what God is saying to us, and indeed, listen for our Shepherd’s voice, which is the very point of the Psalm itself.

You see, the Psalmist, who for this one is traditionally thought to be King David himself, writes these verses in a very interesting way, making intentional uses of these words. “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures” sounds really great, and it is not an inaccurate translation, but this verb ‘maketh’ here is very strong. The Lord “causes” or “makes” or even “forces” us to lie down, or literally be “stretched out” in fields meant for grazing. The shepherd is the source of all of our comfort, who leads us beside “still” or “restful” waters. Water is a symbol for chaos in Hebrew, but it is also necessary for life. So here we are led to water that is not chaotic, but is restful, and life giving.

The next line is one of those places where the English language we translate into has changed. When we hear, “He restores my soul,” in our culture, post enlightenment, we think of a distinct body and soul as two separate things. But in Hebrew, the word ‘nephesh’ is not meant to be a soul apart from a body. This Hebrew word means life, also neck as in where an animal is slaughtered, and also soul, so this word is the whole of our being, who we are, our identity. And the verb here is ‘shuv,’ that same word often translated as ‘repent,’ and it means to turn around, to be restored, yes, but also to be returned. The Shepherd returns our whole self or being to the way it should be, directed to him. If we think in the terms of the enlightenment, with body and soul dualism, we miss the beauty of God’s concern for our whole selves.

The next phrase – he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake –is again an accurate translation, but here leads takes on a different concept, because the word for ‘path’ here is not the usual Hebrew word for road or path (*derek*). No, here the word is one where the root is a ‘calf,’ as in a ‘baby cow.’ This is the path that is made by an animal trampling down vegetation and dirt. It is an entrenchment, a wagon path. It made me think even, of a path made by dragging this baby cow to its pen. What’s more, ‘righteousness,’ is the Hebrew word for ‘justice.’ This is God’s correction of what is wrong. So, God drags us along paths of justice, perhaps against our will here, for God’s own purposes, for His name’s sake.

This is not a Psalm meant for us to feel comfortable, but one to comfort us. Even when we are in the shadow of death, even when evil is by us, for God is with us, and the rod and staff of our shepherd are meant to comfort us, not hurt us. This is evident in the preparation of a table in the presence of enemies. Now, this word for enemies, is literally those that “bind” or “trap” us, trying to capture us. This is likely a reference both to the nations around Israel, the gentiles, who are always a threat to conquer, and also, those who wished to capture David, to imprison him, bind him, for Saul.

Yet, God anoints the Psalmist’s head with oil and his cup overflows. This is another unexpected word. This is not ‘messiach’ the Hebrew word for anoint from which we get Messiah. No, this is a word that literally means make fat, but was used for anointings, when the anointing was done

in a way that drenched a person in the fat so you don't see them. They are made fat, to look like the oil. Whether it is oil or the wine in the cup, what flows does so liberally and uncontrollably, and where does it go? It pours out to the table, to the enemies seated at the same table.

Even when the enemies are getting the benefits of God. Our God never leaves us. God's goodness, or 'tov,' in Hebrew, is not merely good, as in something could be better, or great, but a goodness that is the ultimate. It cannot be exceeded. And God's mercy here is 'hesed,' which is the word for God's steadfast loving kindness, a covenantal commitment that never fails.

The beginning of our passage is the final scene after Jesus heals a man who was born blind. The Judean leaders have seen a miracle, one never done before in the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus has restored a person's sight, and Jesus tells them that they are still blind. What's more, Jesus wades into the ethnic tensions of his day, telling the Judean leaders that he has not only come for this flock. He has come for sheep outside that flock, sheep among the nations, the gentiles who will hear Jesus's voice. The Judean leaders do not see this as comfort. They see comfort as being comfortable, which is the end of the gentiles, a future where Israel reigns alone and all enemies are gone, destroyed and defeated.

But Jesus tells them that the enemy to be defeated is not the gentiles, but death itself. He says he will lay down his life, and pick it up again, because that is his authority. He is the Word of God, the Son of God, by which indeed God's own self, became human, and now, he foreshadows that he will lay down his life on the cross for us, for the sheep, and pick it up again, that is, he will rise again for us. This is so that we might follow him and share in his life, which is both abundant – meaning all that we need – and eternal – both now and in the new creation.

What's interesting to me then is that John jumps forward to the Feast of the Dedication, which is the rededication of the temple after it was violated by the Syrian-Greeks. It was reclaimed by the Maccabeans in their defeat of Antiochus Epiphanes. We know it today as Hanukkah, a feast centered on God's faithfulness, but for the Jews in that day, it was about getting the gentiles out and expelling them from the temple, and someday, the holy land altogether. This is the setting for when a people anxious for freedom, ask Jesus if he is the Messiah: *Are you the one we want, the one who will defeat and destroy Rome, and purify the temple yet again and make us all comfortable?*

Jesus tells them that he has already answered them – in word and in deed. He is the good shepherd, the shepherd of not only Israel, but of the whole world, and they do not recognize this because they do not hear his voice even though they are from Israel. Some seek to be comfortable in their own wealth, power and popularity, and do not seek to be comforted by God's presence with them. He reminded them that God's promise is to bring down the wealthy, powerful and popular, and raise up the poor, lowly and outcast, to unite the many different flocks as equals, following Him, the one good shepherd. It was for this, that they reacted, picking up stones to throw and kill him there.

My sisters and brothers, God shared in our humanity in Jesus to do what Israel could not. For God had selected one nation to be a light to every nation, as promised to Abraham. The Lord's

calling for Israel was for them to be different from the world in order to attract the world to them, to be reconciled to God through them. But instead, like we do in our lives, Israel acted as the world did, in sin and disobedience. Israel gave up on its mission to bring the nations to them, and instead, focused on forcing the nations out. But Christ came to be the embodiment of Israel, and to fulfill this purpose, fulfill the law, being also the embodiment of God to defeat sin and death, and give us life.

God chose one nation in order to bring about the reconciliation of all nations to him. What we see in Christ and the call of Abraham, in the continuity of Old and New testaments, is that God has always desired to have one family – a diverse and multi-ethnic family, made up of people from every nation, every ethnicity, every culture. This is not to dilute the nations and ethnicities into one dominant culture, but to unite all of God's people, in all of its diversity, behind the voice of the good shepherd to follow him, comforted by him, wherever he might lead them.

Friends, what we see in Psalm 23 and in John's gospel is the comfort of the Lord our Shepherd, when we are not comfortable – especially, when we are with people different from us. We are comfortable when we are homogenous – one race, one ethnicity, one tradition, one ideological viewpoint, with people just like us. We are stretched out, sometimes feel bound up, confined, when we are with people who are different from us. But this is where God calls us to be, not to defeat them, but to be joined by and to join to them in reconciling all people through Jesus.

Last week, we had a beautiful luncheon for our new members and their sponsors, and it was so great to see our longtime members celebrating new people among us. This was our first glimpse of the Kingdom in the luncheon, but another came, when a man who looked different from just about everyone in the room came in. He was greeted first by members of the Member life committee, and they invited to share in a meal to which he had not been invited, but was now welcomed and given a seat. He was not treated as one in need, but as one who was welcomed as an equal. That was awesome to see.

He came through our doors in search of help, and trying to be a shepherd to protect the flock, I worked to garner some resources for him, meet his needs and send him on his way, before he started asking members of the congregation. But then several responded to his plight and shared with him to help him. He could have been a scam artist or an addict, absolutely, but even so, he was and is a human being made in the image of God. I saw this church respond to him in this way, and that was awesome. It makes me thankful for you. He was seen as an angel in our midst and among people who acted confidently, assured of the Lord's presence to love and serve without fear.

My sisters and brothers, the Protestant church has become one of our most segregated spaces. When we rightly reframed worship to be in the languages of the people, the unfortunate side effect was that we divided. The English had one church. The French another. The Germans and Polish, yet another. We divided, first on language, then even more into denominations, then into black and white, and now even churches of different political ideologies.

If we take Jesus seriously here, we see that this is not the intent. The intent is a church made up of people who look differently from each other, who think differently from each other, who come from different backgrounds, uniting in Christ. But here's the problem, we can't just start forcing people to convert. We can't start a member swap program with other churches to be more diverse. No, that's not going to work either.

However, what we can do is work with people and organizations that are different from us. We can listen to their voices and listen for God in their voices. We can work with churches that are different from us. We can welcome others, even when we feel bound by our differences. We are not called to be comfortable in this world, but comforted, trusting in our shepherd, and listening for his voice, to remind us that we are never alone. Amen.