

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**Psalm 23**  
**March 30, 2014**

**“If I Walk With God”**

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

*“The Lord is my shepherd...”*

You just heard the poetic, touching 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm read from the King James Bible...with the lyrical thys and thous, leadeth, restoreth, preparest, anointest. Some of you were saying it quietly as Ellen read it aloud. For some of you, this is the ONLY Biblical passage you know by heart. If that is true....you chose a good one. This Psalm will see you through many hard times and sustain you through many troubles.

The Book of Psalms is in the part of the Bible called the Hebrew Scriptures. The 150 Psalms are a diverse collection of devotional poetry, laments, hymns of praise, blessings and curses, songs of thanksgiving, and words of wisdom. John Calvin called the Psalms “the mirror of man” because the full range of feelings, hopes, imaginings and experiences of the Israelites is conveyed with raw honesty, vivid images, profound insights, and prophetic visions. Praised by Martin Luther as “a Bible in miniature,” the Psalms lift up universal struggles with divine revelation, personal and collective identity, doubt and faithfulness. Although many Psalms are beautiful and stirring, few are as comforting and inspiring as the 23<sup>rd</sup> written (it is believed) by King David.

Because the Book of Psalms is so extraordinary, it has captured the attention of writers for years. Many poets and authors have reinterpreted the Psalms from their own perspective.

Listen now to some lines, snippets, of Psalm 23 that have been rewritten by poets, scholars, and ordinary individuals.

From REJOICE, BELOVED WOMAN! by Barbara Monda

*My Mother is my shepherd and I lack nothing.  
She lays me down in green grass and carries fresh water to me.  
I can rest in her watchfulness while my soul is restored.  
She leads me along the path to wholeness.*

This from OPENING TO YOU: ZEN-INSPIRED TRANSLATIONS 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*

This from THE PSALMS IN HAIKU by Father Richard Gwyn

*Your rod and Your staff  
will be of comfort to me,  
signs of Your nearness.*

And THE PSALMS: A NEW TRANSLATION FOR PRAYER AND WORSHIP by Gary Chamberlain

*In order to show who you are,  
You guide me in paths that are right.  
Even walking through dark valleys,  
I have no fear of harm.  
For you yourself are with me;  
Your rod and staff reassure me.*

This from GOD IS FOR REAL, MAN: INTERPRETATIONS OF BIBLE PASSAGES AS TOLD BY SOME OF GOD'S BAD-TEMPERED ANGELS WITH BUSTED HALOS

*The Lord is like my Probation Officer,  
He will help me,  
He tries to help me make it every day.  
He makes me play it cool  
And feel good inside of me.  
He shows me the right path  
So I'll have a good record,*

*And he'll have one too.*

This from PSALMS FOR PRAYING by Nan Merrill

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of all my fears;  
you bless me with oil, my cup overflows.*

This from THE HIP HOP PRAYER BOOK by the Hip Hop Mass group

*The Lord is all that I need for nothing.  
He allows me to chill.  
He keeps me from being heated  
and allows me to breathe easy.  
He guides my life so that I can represent  
and give shout outs in his Name.  
And even though I walk through the Hood of death,  
I don't back down for you have my back.*

And from BOOK OF PSALMS by Stephen Mitchell

*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...*

We are drawn to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm because of its simplicity and profound message. We learn it by heart because it is elegant and filled with grace. We repeat it to ourselves because it quiets our hearts and gives us courage. We say it at funerals because it helps dry our tears.

Psalm 23—6 verses, 122 words total—reveals much about God and our relationship with God.

Consider the opening words. For years I said *the Lord is my SHEPHERD...* meaning that the Lord is my guide, protector, comforter.

True. But I now hear those words differently. Now I hear:

THE LORD is my shepherd

meaning you are not...Caesar you are not, wealth you are not, power and influence you are not, material goods you are not, the seductions of modern living you are not, the temptations I encounter you are not.

I read that the emphasis on the LORD is my shepherd can be traced back to when African slaves in bondage said this prayer. They meant

THE LORD is my shepherd! You my supposed master, you do NOT own me, the LORD is my shepherd.

And the image of shepherd...

King David was a shepherd in his youth. In writing about God, David chose a humble image—instead of king, emperor, ruler, counselor or anything more powerful. David chose shepherd because he knew that shepherds guard their flocks against all dangers. David was aware that shepherds knew each sheep in their flock and the sheep knew the sound of their shepherd's voice. David knew from first-hand experience that being a shepherd was a lowly job, lacking in prestige—it was more of a loving, gentle identity. David chose an image for God that is parental, kind, care-taking, and nurturing.

<sup>2</sup> *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

Notice the active verbs, maketh, leadeth—God is an active player in our lives. (Notice also that God is referred to in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person. That will change later in the Psalm.) Green pastures and still waters were hard to find in ancient Palestine, much of the land was arid. Here David is invoking the image of heaven.

<sup>3</sup> *He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.*

David is realistic and honest. He knows himself and humanity. He has chosen the word RESTORETH knowing that our souls will grow weary. We will tire, fumble, stumble, doubt and fail. And we are promised that God will be there, will restore our souls, and will intervene to lead us toward righteousness. How comforting to know that when in close communion with God, we will be nudged, led, guided toward righteousness. God's plan for us, God's work with us is to lead us—always—toward righteousness.

<sup>4</sup> *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.*

Now God is no longer HE, God is now YOU or, in the King James Version, THOU. The Psalm becomes more intimate—the Psalmist, no longer speaking ABOUT God, is speaking TO GOD. The Psalm does not say I might face dangers, I might face trouble, the Psalm says...*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.* This is the place of our deepest troubles and fears, the place we think no one will accompany us.

The Psalm is clear, I will walk through these painful times. I will be in trouble, in the shadow of worry, peril, and death. And yet fear will not overcome me. The Psalm does not say this might happen, but says instead when this happens, God will be there. . .the valley of the shadow of death. . .we will face it, but we need not fear. . .for God's presence will be with us. The shepherd will not lead us away from this place, instead we will walk right through it together. And like a shepherd, God has a rod to ward off dangers and a staff to bring us back to the fold—these are the concrete manifestations of the defense and protection of the sheep.

*<sup>5</sup> Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:  
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

Now the shepherd image gives way to the metaphor of host—we enter a scene of table fellowship. And notice, the Psalm does not say I might have enemies—it assumes there will be enemies. Whether those enemies are pain, addiction, internal demons, whatever they are, God will make a feast for me in front of that which has me by the throat. And God will bless me. . .with oil. . .and fill my cup to overflowing. What God offers is without limit—it is we who are limited in our ability to receive. God is telling us: you are my beloved upon whom I lavish my abundance.

*<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

God's goodness, sweetness and compassion will surround me, dance around me, linger beside me, and follow me as long as I live. And when I die, I will be gathered up to God and dwell in God's presence forever.

It is no wonder we love this Psalm.

It tells us three important things about our relationship with God:

- God is with us, always.
- God is bigger than our fears.
- God loves us profoundly.

It seems to me that is all we need to know. . . .

All we need to know when we are scared.

All we need to know when we have doubts.

All we need to know when we feel troubled.

All we need to know when we are lost.

All we need to know when we face death.

All we need to know is that God has promised:

I am with you always.  
I am bigger than your fear.  
I love you.

David captured the essence of what we need to hear from God in six verses.  
Words we have come to love so much we have learned them by heart.

Earlier, I shared several interpretations of Psalm 23 by different writers—but I saved one version, my favorite, for last.  
Listen to this interpretation written by Marie-Helene Delval in her enchanting book  
PSALMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

*God is my shepherd.  
He leads me in the right direction.  
And even if I have to walk in a dark place,  
I am not scared.  
I know nothing will hurt me if I walk with God!*

...nothing will hurt me if I walk with God.  
I can give my scared to God.  
I can give my shame to God.  
I can give my sorrow to God.  
I can give my lost-ness to God.  
I can give my pain to God.  
I can give my failure to God.  
I can give my fear to God.  
Nothing will hurt me, if I walk with God.

In the end, nothing awful will win.  
Love and comfort will win...if I walk with God.

In his book *THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD*, Rabbi Harold Kushner describes Psalm 23 as six short verses “...from a single page of the Bible that can change your life.”

I think he is right.

You know this Psalm by heart.  
I want you to say it often.  
And more than that.  
I want you to believe it.  
Amen.

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