

## A Better Life

A Sermon taken from Psalm 23 and John 10 and preached on May 15, 2011 at  
Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina  
by Dr. Ken Carter.

Jesus was Jewish and he read and prayed the scriptures of his tradition, and especially, it seems, the Psalms. In the gospel for today, John remembers the teaching of Jesus and the way he identified himself: "**I am the good shepherd.**" In Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage, in *The Message*, Jesus defines the mission of the shepherd: "*I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.*"

A famous preacher, William Sloane Coffin, once noted that just as there is finally only one hymn, "*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*", there is only one Psalm, the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Perhaps you would choose a different hymn, but most likely the Psalm that is on the hearts and lips of most believers is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: "*The Lord is My Shepherd*".

As an aside, 2011 is also the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. I was called by a reporter who was developing a story about the King James Version, and he asked how often I used this version. I have learned to be very careful about whatever I say to a reporter, but what I realized, in our conversation, is that the King James is most meaningful to me, now, in its translation of the Psalms. And I cannot think of this particular psalm apart from the King James Version.

Why does this Psalm speak to us, why do its words go down into the deepest places in our hearts, why does it continue to sing of God's presence to us? I am not sure, but I know that there is a power in this psalm. It is one of the passages of scripture that is most often read at memorial services, and most often it can be read, recited and shared by those present from memory. There is something about this brief writing that resonates within us, at our time of greatest need. It is profound.

But the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm speaks of more than death; it also speaks of life, and especially of the One who is the Lord of life, the Good Shepherd (John 10). It begins: "The Lord is my shepherd". It is one of those ancient phrases that no longer connect with the way most of us live---most of us, and much of the world's population has moved to the city---but it continues to have relevance.

"The Lord is my shepherd" carries with it an important implication: **God provides for us**. We know this. But sometimes we forget. Those who prayed these psalms remembered their history: in forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Israel lacked nothing. God provided enough each day for that day.

Do we know what life will be like tomorrow? No. But we know that there are provisions for today. The Lord, our shepherd, will see to that. Scholars teach us that the term shepherd was often a reference to royalty, and the rod and the staff were the signs of office. Rulers, kings are supposed to shepherd and care for their people. Because the Lord is our shepherd, we have all that we need. *God provides.*

This morning in the worship services we will celebrate the sacraments of the Holy Communion and Baptism. When we come forward to receive the bread and the cup, we are reminded again, in a tangible way, that God will sustain us, just as an ordinary meal gives us the strength to make it through a day's work. When a child is baptized, the water is a reminder of God's life in the midst of death, of refreshment and renewal, and our prayer is that this child will be surrounded by all of the resources that he needs in life.

The Lord is my shepherd. God provides for us.

There is a second affirmation: ***Thou art with me.*** We need to know that we are not alone in this life's journey. It helps to sense that someone walks beside us, even, at times, in the words of the familiar "footprints in the sand" saying, that someone carries us. And this psalm voices that truth. Do you hear it? It teaches us that:

Even in the *dangerous places*, we are not alone  
Even in the *valley of the shadow of death*, we are not alone  
Even as we are *being carted into surgery*, we are not alone  
Even as we are *taking that long walk to the graveside*, we are not alone  
Even as we watch *the slow deterioration of a loved one's faculties*, we are not alone  
Even as we *send our children away to school*, we are not alone  
Even as we face *economic uncertainty*, we are not alone  
Even as we *get used to life in a new place*, we are not alone.

We can pray with Christians and Jews throughout the ages: *Thou art with me.*

A third affirmation: ***Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.*** Here we see a shift in the psalm: God is no longer the shepherd to the sheep. God is now the Host, and we are the guests. Those hearing and praying this psalm would have known about the desert rule of hospitality. If I were in danger, and enemies were pursuing me, I would come to your door, and according to the desert rule of hospitality, you would be required to take me in for two nights and a day in between, and my enemies would have to stay outside the circle of light cast by the fire.

The Lord prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies. The Lord provides a place of safety. Sometimes I will take a few minutes and watch

the evening news, maybe at eleven o'clock. The clear message---the world is not a safe place. The world is often a dangerous place: Abuse and addiction, rage and robbery, terrorism and torture. And the setting can be our neighborhood or a nation across the planet.

In a dangerous world, people search for sanctuary.

At its best, a Christian church is a sanctuary: it is a place where people are treated with dignity. In the early Methodist movement, two hundred and fifty years ago, members agreed to follow three simple rules, which began with "first, do no harm". Why? Because every person is created in the image of God.

And so we search for sanctuary in order to find God. We are also looking for a community that embodies the qualities of the Shepherd who watches over, protects, provides for, creates a safe place for those under his care.

Is the church always a safe place? Is the church always a sanctuary? No. And here the media, with laser-like focus, locates our faults, our sins, saying, in effect, "you are not who you proclaim yourself to be" when you abuse children or mirror the political divisions or judge your neighbor.

In life we will experience stress, adversity, danger. And so we are given these words:

**Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.**

A fourth and final affirmation: "***I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever***". The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is a psalm about our destiny. There is a truism about small groups that says that we feel most confident and least anxious when we know where we are going. The psalmist cries out: "***I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever***". Now the "house of the Lord" has several meanings: for those who originally prayed this psalm, it meant the temple, in Jerusalem. I have stood at the wall of that temple. It is the sacred place that our chancel choir so often sings about in their setting of the 84<sup>th</sup> Psalm, "*How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place*".

Most of us will never journey to the temple in Jerusalem, but we are drawn to some other holy place: it could be in the natural world---the coast, or the mountains; it could be an old home place, where you grew up; it could be here, in this sanctuary.

This is the house of the Lord.

It is where we come, again and again, to repair some brokenness in our lives,  
it where we come, again and again, to renew some deficit of energy or spirit,

it is where we come, again and again, to listen for some voice that will guide our feet,  
it is where we come, again and again, to be still and know that he is God.

But "house of the Lord" carries an additional meaning for the Christian who prays it: God has a destiny for us, echoed in the words of Jesus, "**I go to prepare a place for you**" (see John 14. 1-3)---I will actually preach about that phrase next Sunday. The shepherd guides us safely to a home not made with hands, whose builder and maker is God. The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote:

**"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land that he had been promised...For he looked to that city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God"** (11. 8-10).

What does this Psalm say to us, this morning? Some of us listen to the psalm and we are wondering about how we are going to find the resources—material, spiritual, financial, psychological—to make it through the next week. And if we find ourselves in that place we can believe the good news: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

Some of us listen to the psalm, and we sense that we are all alone in the world. Maybe we feel all alone in our homes, all alone in our struggles, without a sense that we truly matter to any other person. And if we find ourselves in that place we can believe the good news: *Thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*

Some of us are gripped by a fear that will not go away, and we need to draw a circle around ourselves or our families or those we love that will keep out violence or drugs or danger or stress. If we find ourselves in this place we can believe the good news: *Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies.*

And some of us are anxious about the future, and we have lived long enough to know that there is more to life than this life, that heaven is a reality for which we pray and to which we find ourselves being drawn. And if we discover ourselves in this place, we can believe the good news: *I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

If there are a few core teachings in our faith, and here I am thinking of the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes, surely the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is one of them. It was formational for Jesus and it can be formational for each of us. It was his way and it is our way to "**real and eternal life, more life and a better life than we have ever dreamed of.**"