

The Shepherd's Psalm  
Sermon on Psalm 23 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, April 29, 2007

If America's favorite hymn is "Amazing Grace," then surely our favorite psalm is the Twenty-third psalm. Many of us learned it as children, probably in the King James Version, the one with "the valley of the shadow of death." It has been recited in public school classrooms of years past and uttered at hospital bedsides and prayed in soldiers' foxholes. It seems to be said or printed at nearly every funeral I have ever attended—so often, in fact, that I am beginning to suspect that the Twenty-third psalm has been named the official psalm of the funeral industry.

It isn't hard to understand why the Twenty-third psalm is so popular: It speaks to us in the most reassuring way of God's care: how God, like a shepherd, provides for us and protects us, leading us to places of safety and rest, places where a table is set before us even in the presence of our enemies and our cup "runneth over." "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow [us] all the days of [our] li[ves], and [we] will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (23:6).

But "Amazing Grace" hasn't always been America's favorite hymn. In 1953 one large-scale poll found that that distinction belonged to "The Old Rugged Cross." And the Twenty-third psalm hasn't always been our favorite psalm—even for funerals. As two scholars wrote, "If sex is the common preoccupation of Americans in the mid-twentieth century, then death was the obsession of evangelical Protestants in the first half of the nineteenth."<sup>1</sup> And as obsessed as our Protestant forebears were with death, the Twenty-third psalm appears to have played no part in assuaging their grief. The form of the *Book of Common Prayer* used in the 1800s called for verses from Ps. 39 or all of Ps. 90 to be used for the burial of the dead. Methodists didn't use Psalm 23 in funeral ceremonies until 1916. The Twenty-third psalm didn't appear in Episcopal

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Lynn and Elliott Wright, *The Big Little School* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 41, quoted by William L. Holladay in *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 360.

funerals until the prayer book was revised in 1979! The Twenty-third psalm was not a staple of the earliest revival preaching, nor was it a convention of popular culture before the Civil War. You would find the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount, and even Psalms 19 and 104 in the McGuffey's *Readers*, but you would not find the Twenty-third psalm.<sup>2</sup>

It was probably the enormously popular preacher, Henry Ward Beecher who did for the Twenty-third psalm what Thomas Edison did for electricity and Henry Ford did for cars. Beecher called the Twenty-third psalm "the nightingale of the psalms," saying:

It has charmed more griefs to rest than all the philosophy of the world. It has remanded to their dungeon more felon thoughts, more black doubts, more thieving sorrows, than there are sands on the sea shore. It has comforted the noble host of the poor. It has sung courage to the army of the disappointed. It has poured balm and consolation into the heart of the sick, of captives in dungeons, of widows in their pinching griefs, of orphans in their loneliness. ... Nor is its work done.<sup>3</sup>

Beecher's encomium was picked up by other authors, including William A. Knight, whose 1904 book, *The Song of Our Syrian Guest*, sold two million copies, and the British Methodist Leslie Weatherhead, who included Beecher's words in his 1938 book, *A Shepherd Remembers*.

Perhaps no one has done more for Psalm 23, however, than Jesus himself. More than Weatherhead, Knight, or Beecher, Jesus gave this little six-verse psalm a ringing endorsement when he told his disciples, "I am the good shepherd" (Jn. 10:11). It was a simple statement, as straightforward as the statement, "The LORD is my shepherd." And therein lies its incredible power. When David wrote, "The LORD is my shepherd," LORD referred to Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God who had revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush. It was this God who had created and called Israel as a chosen people, holy and beloved. It was this God who had

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<sup>2</sup> Holladay, *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> Holladay quotes Beecher's sermon at length from the latter's *Life Thoughts* (Boston: Phillips Sampson, 1858), 8-10, in *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, p. 363.

liberated Israel from its captivity in Egypt and led them to freedom through the sea. It was this God who had provided manna and meat when the people were hungry and caused water to come forth from the rock when they were thirsty. It was this God who protected Israel from its enemies until they reached the Promised Land. So to say, “The LORD is my shepherd” was to make a profession of faith: It is Yahweh who is my shepherd and not some other god.

Thus when Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd,” he is revealing something about himself. Using a metaphor like that of shepherd for theological purposes is “very serious business” according to James L. Mays because a metaphor “does not simply describe by comparison; it identifies by equation.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus didn’t say, “I am like a good shepherd,” or “Think of me as being a good shepherd.” He said, “I am the good shepherd,” and thus identified himself with Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God who creates and calls, the God who liberates and leads, the God who protects and provides.

All the things that God the shepherd does, Jesus also does: He makes me lie down in green pastures. When Jesus saw the crowds coming to him for instruction and healing, “he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk. 6:34). And when he learned that they had nothing to eat, he made 5000 people “sit down in groups on the green grass” (6:39) and he turned five loaves and two fish into a feast.

He leads me beside still waters. When Jesus encountered a woman of Samaria by a well, he asked her to give him a drink. But in fact it was he who was able to offer the woman living water, and “those who drink of the water that [Jesus] will give will never be thirsty,” for “The water that [he] will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:13-14).

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<sup>4</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994) 115.

He restores my soul, or, better translated, he “keeps me alive.” When Jesus restored sight to blind eyes, returned motion to paralyzed limbs, and rebuked unclean spirits from the demon possessed, he kept men and women alive—healed, made well, restored. Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus, restoring them to life, for he is “the resurrection and the life” (Jn. 11:25).

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, even the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for he is with me; his rod and his staff—they comfort me. When Jesus came from heaven to earth as Son of God and Son of Man, he came as Emmanuel, God with us (Mt. 1:23). “Do not be afraid,” God says throughout the Scriptures, “for I am with you” (Isa. 43:5). The rod was used to ward off enemies, and the staff offered sure guidance. Following his lead, I walk in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

He prepares a table for me, even in the presence of my enemies. On the very night when he knew his enemies were hunting for him to arrest him and bring him to trial, Jesus ordered that the Passover meal be prepared, that he might eat it with his disciples. At the table, with his betrayer beside him, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take, [eat]; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he said, “This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk. 14:22-24).

The Good Shepherd leads us to green pastures and beside still waters, restores the soul and makes alive, walks with us through the darkest valley and prepares an abundant table for us because he loves us and gives himself for us. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,” Jesus said. And the shepherd is the Lamb: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29), “a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pet. 1:19), the Lamb led to the slaughter who, like a sheep before her shearers is silent (Isa. 53:7), Jesus Christ, “the paschal lamb [who] has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

Friends, because Christ has been raised from the dead, the day will come when those who trust him as Shepherd “will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to spring of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:16-17). Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God and to the Lamb who is our Shepherd for ever and ever! Amen.