



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Under the Shepherd's Care
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

April 25, 2010
Easter 4 (Year C)

Psalm 23

Psalm 23

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no 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 anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*

Psalms are for singing, and there's a phrase from that psalm that we just sang that has been sounding in my heart since I first heard it more than 10 years ago. It's actually the first line I sang—"The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want."

Time and again those words set to that tune will well up in my heart, and whenever I hear them inside my heart, I am returned to that foundational truth of my life: I trust in the Lord as my Shepherd, and I am confident that the Lord will supply my every need. And, while I am occasionally distracted by many things, there is great relief in knowing that God is worthy of that trust.

I want to share a bit about how and why I came to trust that the Lord is my Shepherd. I think it's an important conversation, because there's something inside of us—most of us anyway—that wants to be nurtured and cared for. We're looking for a shepherd to guide us, to help us make decisions, to comfort us when we're afraid, to protect

us from dangers that threaten, to console us when we hurt, to provide for us. Oh, I know we don't put it that directly most of the time, but it's there—that place deep inside us that longs to be cared for and loved, protected and sustained. And, while the particulars would be different for you, I want to tell you something about how I came to trust that the Lord is my shepherd.

During a sermon on this psalm last year, I talked about what I shared with the children a moment ago. I recalled how I can still remember how one of my Sunday School teachers sent me this little folding, illustrated booklet with the words of the 23rd Psalm. As I remember it, I had been sick and missed Sunday School for a couple of weeks, and she sent it to me. She invited me to try to memorize it and hoped that it would bring me comfort as I worked at getting well.

While I had probably heard that psalm before, there was something about folding and unfolding that booklet, of reading the words and trying to learn them, of knowing that I was missed by a Sunday School teacher, of her prayer that I be comforted that caused me to recognize what countless before and since have come to know about this psalm. There is a power here that's hard to explain but that grabs you and holds you in such real ways that you can almost feel its grip.

What I didn't expect following that sermon last year was an unexpected gift from my mother. The next time we were together, she presented me with that booklet that I had first held about four decades ago—the same one I shared with the children a few moments ago.

That booklet has become a lens for me this year as I've thought about this psalm and the baptisms of Kayci and Kade, and as I remembered the way my own children worked so hard a couple of months ago to memorize the psalm's words—along with the other children in Faith Village. Along the way, other memories of this psalm welled up, and I heard voices from long ago affirming over and over in their own particular cadence the truth that grips us today. I heard Mike's voice singing, "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want."

I heard Beverly's accent reflecting on how the Lord had always cared for her, even in the difficult times of her life.

I heard the voices of congregations repeating this psalm together at the funerals of those I have loved over the years.

Voice after voice sounded in my heart, and I knew there was a power here that runs deeper than any of us ever fully knows.

As I mentioned, that booklet which my Sunday School teacher gave to me about forty years ago has cast me deep into the truth of what it means to belong to the God who claims us in the waters of baptism. You see, that simple book holds up the truth of what I was talking with Kayci about when we talked about her baptism a few nights ago.

As I told Kayci (and Kade, though I'm not sure he was paying as much attention as his older sister, since he's only a year old), baptism is about promises that are made

around the font. And there are three parties making promises today.

First, Kayci and Kade's parents—Allen and Terri—will be promising to live the Christian faith and to teach that faith to their children.

And then there's the rest of us who gather today—we will promise to help Allen and Terri keep their promise, and we'll do that by caring for Kayci and Kade in real ways, which may mean that you'll get to teach them in a Sunday School class. Or, it may mean that you'll simply take time to listen to them when you chat with them in the hallway. Or it could mean that you'll serve as their mentor in a confirmation class when they get to that point, or help them in Vacation Bible School, or simply write them a note ten years from now telling them that you prayed for them on the day they were baptized.

The candles we will give to them today will become a silent testimony to our promises, and I am hopeful that we will keep our promises to Kayci and Kade by doing everything we can to nurture them in the faith. We are not just witnesses, but we are also promise-makers.

Giving strength to Allen and Terri's promises and those we will make, are the promises of God. In the waters of baptism, God will mark Kayci and Kade as his own, and God promises to provide.

Kayci and Kade will now get to spend a lifetime living into the promises of their baptisms, just as we are invited to do as well.

A couple of months ago, the children in Faith Village studied this psalm. You may have seen some of their artwork in the slideshow that was running here in the sanctuary before worship.

As powerful as that artwork is—and it is—there is something about their learning this psalm by heart that hit me in a way that I wasn't fully prepared for. Not unlike the other families with children in Faith Village, our family set out to take this psalm into our hearts. The girls weren't sure they could do it when we started, and so, night after night, we spoke the words and repeated the words and wrote the words and marched up and down the stairs to the words. Aaron, who is just now figuring out words and their meanings, watched and listened to it all, and though he couldn't speak the words, they're still roaming around somewhere inside him.

I was overcome with joy when my own children learned this psalm deeply. One night, as they sat in my lap, I shared with them the booklet that I had when I was about their age, and I shared with them how thankful I was that a Sunday School teacher had taken the time to help me learn, and that I hope they kept that psalm inside of them as long as they lived.

And I felt the same joy whenever another child from this congregation came up and said the words to me. It happened at the Dance Studio where Rachel takes a class. It happened at Cub Run Elementary School. It happened in the office hallway and the fellowship hall and the sanctuary. Everywhere I turned over the past several months, somebody somewhere was sounding these words of comfort and hope.

There have been countless times when I have felt the power of this psalm flood over me and into me. Standing by the grave of a friend and overcome with grief, the words have borne me up. In a darkened sanctuary after learning of the death of six youth on the way home from church camp, the words steadied my reeling soul. Time after time, the words of this psalm have leaped from the recesses of who I am to sound again for me the amazing hope that I belong to God who walks with me and feeds me and gives me rest.

You are here in church today, I suspect, because someone along the way took the time to nurture you in the faith. My hope for this sermon is that you will remember them with joy.

But I also hope for something more—that you will not be afraid to share your own trust in God as your shepherd with those who are even now searching for a shepherd of their own. It could be that someone’s love for you may cause them to consider God’s love for them in a way that they never have before. Invite them to come with you to church on Bring a Friend Sunday next month—or any other Sunday—because your love for them may be just the thing God will use to make them aware of God’s love for them, leading them into the discovery of the shepherd they don’t have to go searching for, but who pursues them all the days of their lives.

Some of you know that Paul O’Gorek, one of the chaplains at Sunnyside, will often invite those gathered for a funeral to say the words from this psalm together, and so I want to invite you to do that with me now. Just speak whatever translation you hold in your heart, as together we remember this psalm’s amazing power:

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 he leads me beside still waters;
 he restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.
 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no 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 anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 forever.*