

Soul Restoration

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Psalm 23

There is a risk in preaching on a text as familiar as the 23rd Psalm. It will call forth all kinds of associations, and you may go off into your own thoughts, not listening to a word I'm saying. However, it is a lectionary passage worth attending to because it is far more than a staple of funeral services and comfort at the end of life. It is a message about trust in God—here and now, present and personal.

The psalm begins as a metaphor of shepherd and sheep. “The LORD is my shepherd.” Now I'm sure you have heard it said that sheep are not very bright, that they require a guide in order to get from one place to another. That's true, but let's consider the positive side. Sheep live in community and generally stick together, with the exception of the occasional wanderer. We also live in community, and, like sheep, look for a leader to guide us. The 23rd Psalm is attributed to King David. Consider the fact that David was a wealthy man with great power. He could have claimed to be self-made, but instead he affirms that God is his guide, the one on whom he depends for life. The psalm does not speak of a head sheep, only of the shepherd. The psalm begins and ends with the LORD. “The LORD is my shepherd” at the beginning, and, at the end, “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.” This is a statement of faith and a statement of trust in God. And it is spoken—this is important—in the context of a faith community.

A couple of weeks ago 60 Minutes featured a story about St. Benedict's Prep School called “The Resurrection of St. Benedict's.” This Catholic school in Newark, New Jersey had been 100% white until the race riots in the 1960's. It closed for a year back then and almost closed permanently, but reinvented itself as an inner city school, predominantly non-white. The head of school, a priest who had attended St. Benedict's as a child, decided to have the students run the school. He figured the students would need to have some control over school policies if they were to feel invested in the community of the school. Note this word “community”—because it is a sense of community that leads people young or old, to consider the common good. The school motto is: “Whatever hurts my brother, hurts me!” If a student fails to show up at school and can't be reached by phone, another student goes out to find him. Father Leahy, the Head of School, noted that many new students would arrive at the school with gang affiliations. They would be told by fellow students that if you are part of the St. Benedict's “gang,” you can't be part of another.

Now a gang is a form of community, but street gangs are typically about power and dominance, and they demand complete loyalty. St. Benedict's Prep is about lifting everyone up. It values academic and athletic achievement, things not valued by the city's street gangs. More importantly, it cares about serving the larger society

by creating a caring school community. In the process the school builds confidence and commitment. It's drop-out rate is 2% in a city whose high school drop-out rate is 30%, and 85% of St. Benedict graduates earn a college degree.

I was moved by the story, but especially by the sense of community among the students. They look out for each other not because the other person serves a purpose but because each person is valued. King David speaks the 23rd psalm in the context of a faith community—the people of Israel. He believed that God held him accountable to be a faithful member of that community. Trust in God's providence is the foundation for a faithful life. David's prosperity and power leads him to be mindful of God and to worship God. He states in Verse 1, "I shall not want" or, as it is translated in the Jewish Bible, "I lack nothing." His relationship with God in the community of the faithful brings with it the end of all needs. Of course, there may be things he and we want, but there is nothing we need in order to serve God faithfully. God supplies those needs within the community of faith. Here at Third Presbyterian we see examples every week of needs being met within this congregation and beyond this congregation in response to God's goodness.

The psalmist goes on to say in vv. 2-3: "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul." The repose found by the psalmist comes from a deep trust in God. How difficult it is to rest and be restored in the presence of the anxieties of daily life. This restoration of the soul is truly a recovery of the true sense of one's being. It is to find one's life again when circumstances or threats have destroyed one's confidence in the meaning and significance of one's life. Many students at St. Benedict's had this experience of having their lives restored upon their immersion in the community of that school. I think of one student portrayed in the 60 Minutes story who was on the mandatory hike up a steep portion of the Appalachian Trail. He honestly didn't think he could make it, but he was surrounded by encouraging fellow students who would not let him fail. Reflect upon your own experience of having your soul, your life, your being restored by placing your trust in God's providence. This is often given substance in the support and encouragement found when others surround us with love, affirming our value to the community. It is given even greater substance when we turn aside from self-interest to affirm another person as a beloved child of God.

Even in deepest darkness, says the psalmist in verse 4, he and we can rely on God's care. This is present and personal. No evil, not even death, can separate us from the comfort God can provide. God is always with us. Then strikingly, in verse 5, God becomes the host, in place of the shepherd metaphor. In the presence of all enemies, death included, God prepares a table to feed us and anoints us with oil, a sign of our acceptance and welcome in God's household. We experience unlimited goodness if we recognize and acknowledge God as the host. Ah, and there is the rub! Do we recognize this God who pursues us with goodness and mercy all the days of our life? The psalmist recognized God in the Torah, the law, and in the temple, where God was believed to dwell. But where do **we** recognize God? In the reading from John 10 Jesus asserts that those who recognize his voice, recognize God, and

follow where he leads. But this is not an easy task. Remember the disciples in last Sunday's reading of John 21. They were fishing when the resurrected Christ called to them from the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. Only the "beloved disciple" appeared to recognize him initially—and this, after the miracle of the huge catch of fish. Jesus asked Peter three times in that story, "Do you love me?" Jesus' last words in the Gospel of John and his final statement to Peter, was: "Follow me."

If we really believe the words of Psalm 23, following the commands of God and his Son, Jesus Christ, is what we do. Our motivation is to have the fellowship with God that gives us life and restores our souls, our beings, to the relationship of trust and dependence we were always meant to have. However, we, like the apostle Peter, will have many missteps. We will affirm our love for Christ, but allow fear to suck life out of us. And fear is pervasive in human society. We are afraid to lose control. We are afraid of vulnerability. We are afraid of becoming victims. We are afraid of suffering and death. We think constantly of ways to insulate ourselves from life's defeats and tragedies. Often, it is when death seems near at hand that we recognize our dependence on God. It may only be in deepest darkness when we can recognize the true light that enlightens and sustains us—that same darkness of which the psalmist speaks in verse 4. But even with all our missteps God's goodness and mercy pursue us. It is present, and it is personal.

Walter Brueggemann divides the psalms into three categories: psalms of Orientation, psalms of Disorientation, and psalms of New Orientation. He places Psalm 23 in the last category: new orientation. Many life situations demand a new orientation: loss of a job, particularly one in which we invest our identity; life-threatening illness; the death of a loved one—these certainly require a new orientation. Think about those events that have had that impact on you. All is well; then suddenly you enter a valley of deep darkness. The psalmist experiences something not all of us can relate to. He experiences the companionship of God in that darkness. The experience of the boys at St. Benedict's is characterized by a community that enables them to resist the darkness in their lives and strive to succeed, but the psalmist speaks of something even more powerful. He experiences a community in which he can recognize the companionship of God. He calls it, "the house of the LORD." It is a community in which God's blessings overflow—even amidst experiences of exile, disappointment, and imperfections. It is a community like this church, where God is visible to the eyes of faith.

When God restores our souls, God restores us to that life when we trusted God and experienced God's amazing peace, like resting in green pastures and beside still waters. When I attended Tom Bracken's memorial service last Monday, I remembered how he had put all of his energy into strengthening himself at the chronic care facility where he was the past few weeks so that he could attend church with this community on Easter Sunday. God was present and personal. It refreshed Tom's spirit and was a blessing for those who spoke with him that day. The first hymn at his memorial was a powerful reflection on God's peace even in the shadow of death. That hymn, "When Peace like a River," was written by Horatio Spafford

shortly after the death of his four daughters in a shipwreck. He wrote it while sailing to Paris to meet his wife, who had survived. The first line goes like this: "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul." I surely don't know if I could write those words in similar circumstances, but this must be the "soul restoration" of which the psalmist speaks. For all of us may Psalm 23 reflect our own trust in God, present and personal. In any valley of deep darkness, may it lay the foundation for a new orientation for each one of us when we need it, relying on God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen