

**“The One You Know by Heart”**  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**May 12, 2019**

**First Scripture Reading: John 10:11-18**

<sup>11</sup>“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

**Second Scripture Reading: Psalm 23**

<sup>1</sup>The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. <sup>2</sup>He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; <sup>3</sup>he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. <sup>6</sup>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.



**Sermon: “The One You Know by Heart”**

There are some things you just know. They’re familiar, they’re comfortable - you’ve heard them and read them so many times you just know them; a song, a limerick, a favorite line from a movie. For instance, I can’t ever remember a time when I didn’t know all the words to *The Alphabet Song*, *Happy Birthday to You*, and *Jesus Loves Me*. I can still sing the ingredients of a Big Mac from an ad campaign that ran over 40 years ago.<sup>1</sup> I can quote you the preamble to the US Constitution, but only if I sing the School House Rocks version.<sup>2</sup> Twenty-six years after graduating USC, I can still remember the combination to my campus mailbox. A few years back when I was on campus for a football game, I stopped by the Post Office to check and see if it still worked. It did.

Some things you just remember; they stick in your brain and never go away. Psalm 23 is one of those things.

Altogether, there are 150 Psalms in the Bible. They range in length from a few verses (Psalm 117 is just 2 verses long) to one that is 176 verses and six pages long (Psalm 119). And they cover a wide range of topics: praise, lament, cries for justice and peace, and prayers for just about everything.

But this one, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, this is the one you know. If you know no other piece of scripture, you probably know this one. Maybe not every word, but you know it. It’s one of those special parts of the Bible that even folks who don’t know their Bible well, have at least some passing memory - it’s comforting. It speaks of God’s provision and of God’s protection. But even so, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is actually a deeply profound theological statement. Here we see the character of God laid before us.

First, the Psalmist proclaims, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Most of us have no experience with sheep so we have no idea what it takes to be a shepherd. We tend to think of sheep as soft and cuddly and always in need of protection. I served a church once that did a live nativity pageant at Christmas. Someone suggested that we actually bring in live sheep for the shepherds to tend. When I approached a farmer who was a member of our congregation about loaning us a couple of his flock for the pageant he said, “Oh, you don’t want to have those sheep around children. One of them might get bitten.” I told him not to worry, that actually most of our kids aren’t really biters anymore. He didn’t think it was funny.

But we know that sheep don’t have a lot of natural defenses, so they are vulnerable to predators.<sup>3</sup> That image of the shepherd standing watch over the flock resonates with us. The idea of a protector and provider leading the sheep to safe grazing lands where they can eat their fill and to streams of water where they can satisfy their thirst, is a powerful one. So, the notion that God is *our* shepherd, is comforting. Which is why it’s such a common image throughout the Bible.

In our first scripture reading, from the gospel according to John, Jesus calls himself “The good shepherd.” His sheep know him and he knows them. He contrasts the “Good Shepherd” who cares about his flock and would lay down his life for them, with the hired-hand who looks after the sheep only to make money. When there is danger, the hired hand runs; But the good shepherd is faithful and will never turn away from his flock.

The author of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter picks-up the metaphor describing Jesus as the “Chief Shepherd.”<sup>4</sup> and as “the shepherd and guardian of [our] souls” who leads us back to him when we are “going astray like sheep”<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, the author of Revelation calls upon this shepherd imagery in his vision of God’s Kingdom writing:

*They 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 springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”<sup>6</sup>*

But when the Psalmist says “The Lord is my shepherd”, it means more than just comfort and care. Bible Scholar James Mays points out that the title “shepherd” also has a royal connotation. In that time and place, “Gods and kings were called the shepherd of their people... [and]the title ‘shepherd’ [was] used for leaders as a designation of [their] relation to the people in their charge.”<sup>7</sup>

So ubiquitous is the image, that many types of leaders, especially kings, were called shepherds of their people. Even Egyptian Pharaohs were sometimes depicted with a shepherd’s staff in hand.<sup>8</sup>

David, the great King of Israel, was a shepherd. You’ll remember the story of David and Goliath, when no one will come out to fight the Philistine Goliath. And when David volunteers, King Saul at first dismisses him as too young, too small, and too inexperienced. But David replies that as a shepherd, he has had to fight off and kill both bears and lions in order to protect his sheep.<sup>9</sup> The author of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel is telling us there, that what makes David a good shepherd, is also what will make him a good king.<sup>10</sup>

As James Mays tells us, saying “The Lord is my shepherd,” was meant to remind readers not just of the pastoral, caring nature of God. It was meant to call to mind all of the theological and political aspects that come with the word “shepherd.” This metaphor is meant to do more than just compare God’s actions to what shepherds do. It is meant to remind the people of all that God has already done, and that God is everything that a good King is supposed to be.<sup>11</sup> In other words, to say the Lord is my shepherd highlights God’s strength and wisdom as well as God’s care and compassion.

And because the Lord is my shepherd ... I shall not want. We remember Israel’s experience of being the flock of God. In the story of the Exodus, we see God’s provision. In the wilderness God provides manna and quail in abundance. The long journey out of Egypt ends with the Israelites crossing the Jordan river and entering into the land of promise; a land flowing with milk and honey with homes that they did not build and vineyards they did not plant.

The Israelites want for nothing because their shepherd has provided all they need. And the Lord’s provision extends beyond just the needs of the body to include the needs of the soul. The Shepherd directs our paths. Sometimes we choose to go a different way, but God always shows us the right way.

And sometimes our journeys can lead us into some very dark places. Life is fraught with harrowing challenges and undesirable circumstances that we simply have to work through. Sometimes our path leads to the death of a loved one, or unwarranted and unexplained suffering. Maybe we come face-to-face with disease, or addiction, or depression; maybe we find ourselves alone, abandoned, betrayed. Life would be easier were we not made to walk those difficult journeys - if we could just take a detour around those dark valleys.

But the Psalmist reminds us that we all find ourselves in the “Valley of the Shadow of Death” at one time or another, but we are never alone. The Shepherd goes with us, accompanied by rod and staff. The staff is the classic shepherd’s crook; it is meant to guide and usher the sheep forward in the direction they are supposed to go. And the rod is used to protect; to beat away the predators who threaten.

To say, “your rod and your staff, they comfort me,” is to affirm that God goes with us through the inevitable dark places on our life’s path. But not as some sort of interested spectator, but rather actively guiding us and protecting us from harm.

Which brings us to the image of hospitality; that in the presence of hostile adversaries, God invites us in to safety, treats us like dignitaries, provides a feast of rich foods, anoints us with fine oils, and fills our wine goblets until they spill over. In the sheltering arms of the Shepherd, we find *not* just enough to survive - but abundant life.

And finally, the Psalmist ends with these words “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.” As a young boy, I attended Homewood Baptist Church where my father grew-up. (This was in the days when my parents were still at odds about whether to raise their children Baptist as my father had been, or in my mother’s Presbyterian tradition. It was also before the Elders of that same church visited our home and informed my mother that her infant baptism was not good enough and that she would need to be re-baptized, thus unwittingly turning our family towards the path of Presbyterianism. But I digress.)

One of my fondest memories of those years at Homewood Baptist, is singing “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me, all the days, all the days of my life.”<sup>12</sup> And my child brain, as yet unfamiliar with the words of Psalm 23, would always wonder who was this woman “Shirley Goodness” and why was it a good thing that she was apparently intent on following me for the rest of my life?

But the beauty of this line is, for me, in the original Hebrew in which it was written. The translation of the word “follow” is actually the same word used elsewhere to describe a hawk pursuing its prey. The “goodness and mercy” of God does not just lope along behind us like a tired dog - it chases us down, with all the relentless determination of a bird of prey; never stopping, never giving in. That is the depth and breadth of God’s love – God’s goodness and mercy will never let us alone. It never stops.

There is much more here that we can unpack: language, imagery, theology. But none of that is really why this Psalm is such an important part of our faith. None of that explains why *this* Psalm in particular stands out so vividly in our collective memory. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm shines brightly in our experience because it’s beauty and grace speaks to our hearts and it nurtures our souls.

When I was interning as a Hospital Chaplain during my seminary years, I remember visiting with one man who wanted to hear it, but I didn’t have a bible with me. He was in ICU so there weren’t any Gideon bibles around and I hadn’t carried one with me on my rounds that day. But he was sick, and he was scared, and he wanted to hear the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

So, I started to recite it as best I could, from memory. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures ...”. It was an odd concoction of flowery King James English and the more modern forms of the NRSV with a few bits and pieces of my own vernacular thrown in to bridge the gaps.

“...he leads me beside the still waters,” I continued, and then I stopped. Frozen, I racked my brain and felt the first inklings of panic begin to stir in my stomach. I was stuck. I couldn’t for the life of me remember what came next.

And then I heard his voice from the bed “He restores my soul.” Though his body was weakened by age and infirmity, there was strength in his voice as his memory called forth the words.

His words jogged my own memory and I was able to continue, “He leads me in right paths for his namesake.” Then pausing to think of the next line, he again joined in “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ... and as he hesitated, I finished the line, “I will fear no evil.”

And so, we went on that way, each of us sharing a line here and a word there until we had recited the entire Psalm. It wasn’t perfect but it didn’t have to be. The words just came to us. It took some time and effort, but the familiar old words came to us. Then we prayed together, for his healing and for strength and courage if healing was not possible.

But in the words of that Psalm, recited together, we had both experienced the peace and comfort of knowing that God is with us and that God cares for us and provides for us. Things like that just stick with you.

There’s a great line in the movie *Dead Poet’s Society*<sup>13</sup> that I think applies here:

*“The human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.”*

The Bible is a tool that helps us understand God and the world and our place in it. But this passage and others like it, are poetry. We remember it because it speaks to us in a different way; it appeals not to our heads, but to our hearts. And it

speaks to our hearts of compassion and mercy and of a love so deep and complete as to be beyond our human comprehension.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” ... “green pastures” ... “still waters”... “restores my soul” ... “Even in the valley of the shadow of death though art with me” ... “My cup runneth over”... “Goodness and mercy... all the days of my life.” These words stay with us; they sing to us, they fill our hearts and lift our spirits, not because they comprise a convincing theological argument and not because they prove some great truth of the universe. These words speak to the beauty of God and the fullness of God’s love and compassion for us.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Bionic Disco. "McDonald's Big Mac Jingle Commercial (1974)." 8 Feb. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEBCV0ic6Tc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEBCV0ic6Tc).

<sup>2</sup> Ahrens, Lynn. “The Preamble.” *Schoolhouse Rock!*, performance by Lynn Ahrens, season 4, episode 4, ABC, 1 Nov. 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Cobb, Richard. “An Introduction to Sheep Behavior.” *Sheep & Goats - Illinois Livestock Trail*, University of Illinois, Department of Animal Sciences, 22 Jan. 1999, [livestocktrail.illinois.edu/sheepnet/paperDisplay.cfm?ContentID=1](http://livestocktrail.illinois.edu/sheepnet/paperDisplay.cfm?ContentID=1).

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 5:4, NRSV

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 2:25, NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 7:16-17, NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Mays, James Luther. *Psalms*. John Knox Press, 1994, p. 117

<sup>8</sup> Creach, Jerome F. D. *Psalms*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p. 32

<sup>9</sup> 1 Samuel 17:31-37, NRSV

<sup>10</sup> Creach, p. 32

<sup>11</sup> Mays, p. 117

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, John W. & Smith, Alfred B. *Surely Goodness and Mercy*. 1958. Singsperation

<sup>13</sup> Schulman, Tom. *Dead Poets Society*. Performance by Robin Williams, et al., Touchstone Pictures/Buena Vista Pictures, 1989.