

# The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm

October 11, 2020

I know I've showed off for you all before by reciting the 23rd Psalm from memory, King James Version, so I won't do that again today. But I am going to preach on the Psalm which is among the most beloved passage in Hebrew Scriptures.

It can bring profound comfort in this time of trial. I know many of us are hurting—physically, psychologically, socially, spiritually. So—hear the good news: God will never leave us alone, and God has a place for us in a pasture, in a palace, where there is peace.

But I want to start today with that time of trial—with the valley of the shadow of death—where we all have been wandering for the last six months.

My earliest memory of the 23rd Psalm is actually one of my earliest memories—the funeral of my Uncle Ivan Korth, in 1963. Ivan, my Uncle Ike, was a dairy farmer, and I looked up to him and really liked him. He was married to my dad's older sister, Norma, and they clearly loved each other and enjoyed having a good time. We'd have feasts, as I recall, in their big old drafty farmhouse outside of Embarrass—not far from where we now live. I remember that the home didn't have duct work for a furnace, but open vents from the second floor down to the first, through which you could “spy” on the grownups as they sat around the table talking and laughing. I probably dropped a Lincoln Log or two through the vents, as well.

That house is still there, as is the barn, across the narrow highway, Korth Road. Uncle Ike was tall and lanky, and I remember the way he carried a full milk can with one arm out to the side to balance himself. I recall walking alongside him once in the barn and saying to him: “You hold your arm out like that for balance, don't you?” I remember him chuckling, and saying “yes, I do.” And then I remember walking like Ivan—even though my milk pail was empty, or perhaps half full.

But Ivan was an NFO organizer—the National Farmer's Organization—a national Union for farmers. His nickname was “Red,” and not only because he drove International Harvester red Farmall tractors. It wasn't a term of endearment.

Ike died young; a car accident put him in a ditch on a foggy morning, and he never fully recovered—dying of a heart attack at age 40. And my memory of the 23rd Psalm comes because that was written in brass on the inside of his casket—which was open the day of his funeral—in the small country church in Embarrass, not far from where we now live.

As we stood there in the church, my father and me, I read the Psalm as my father wept. And then I remember him saying, “Good-bye, Ike.” It was probably my earliest brush with death—and surely the saddest, given his youth.

I begin with this story not because my experience was so interesting or unique, but because it reveals how this Psalm can serve as comfort in a time of trial. It’s not a Psalm of lament—there are those, too. It’s a Psalm to bring courage—and comfort—to any who fear.

The Lord is our shepherd. There was a time, in my youth as an academic, when I made fun of this metaphor. “How many of us have living experience of shepherds?” I asked my Introduction to Theology classes at Valparaiso. “And if God is our shepherd, what does that make us?” I went on. “Sheep! Are you a sheep?” I’d holler at the 18- and 19-year-old undergraduates who sat and stared at me with some combination of fear (it was a required class) and longing (they were eager to learn, once they figured out that theology could actually be interesting).

Anyway—I no longer feel so critical of the metaphor: God as a shepherd, and us as sheep. When we’re honest, we are sheep, aren’t we? We’ll follow a leader into a valley of the shadow of death—what else is war? We’ll follow a leader who lifts up for us the better angels of our nature—what else is morality? And we’ll follow a leader who protects us and, alas, some will follow one who doesn’t.

The theory behind this isn’t complex, but it is interesting. For several decades now, I’ve been part of an academic guild called the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. That group of global scholars follows and expands the work of the late Stanford Professor Rene Girard. Girard is best known for his theory of sacrifice—how human communities identify a scapegoat to sacrifice to preserve their unanimity by excluding one of their members, or one group. This pattern of scapegoating is evident in every nation, in every culture, in every congregation.

What is less well known about Girard’s thinking, however, is how this pattern of scapegoating and violence is based on what he calls—following Aristotle—mimesis. Mimesis is a Greek word from which our word imitation comes. For Girard, most scapegoating is unconscious, driven by mimesis. We sacrifice one of our own in an attempt to keep the peace. We accept violence, we practice violence, we follow violence—because we are sheep. It’s a pattern readily observable in history; in our nation; in our congregation.

And yet: “The Lord is our shepherd. We shall not want.” This second clause in the Psalm puts the emphasis where it belongs. When we are sheep—as we all sometimes are—God is a shepherd who provides. Our mimesis won’t kill us. Our sins will be forgiven. We’ll have a protector to follow.

It's really that simple, isn't it? EVERYTHING we have is sheer gift. None of us gave birth to ourselves. The American myth of the self-made man (or woman) is a lie. We are because others were. So, we shall not want.

"You make us lie down in green pastures, you lead us beside still waters, you restore our souls." Oh, how good that sounds, doesn't it? You make us lie down. Rest is holy. Sleep is restorative. A good break is part of God's plan. The Lord's way includes a sabbath.

Green pastures invariably invoke for us abundance. There's plenty to eat. It's soft, and warm, and smells good. The waving wheat, can sure smell sweet, when the wind comes right behind the rain.

And those still waters are easy for us to drink from. They're calm, reflective, clear, cool, refreshing.

"You make us lie down in green pastures, you lead us beside still waters, you restore our souls." The images do their work, don't they? Does your soul feel restored? I hope so.

"You lead us in paths of righteousness for your name's sake." A righteous path is a just path. Sheep are known to stray. They can give a shepherd a bad name pretty easily.

Just as a congregation struggles in the wake of a clergy scandal, or in the wake of its own unconscious scapegoating, so does a country struggle in the wake of any leadership deficit. I remember Watergate. I remember how fractured we were then, in the struggle to end the stupid, senseless, ideologically-driven war in Vietnam that cost 58,000 American lives and over 2 million Vietnamese. I remember how the body count was how we kept track of whether we were winning or losing.

The body count . . . and now, 211,000 American lives?

Yes, sheep are known to stray, just as they are known to follow a leader who doesn't know where to lead them, who is incompetent, who is manipulative and lying. So, lead us in paths of righteousness, for your name's sake. For even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil.

Shakespeare, not surprisingly, put it well—in Hamlet: *"Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity."*

We will walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We do walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And yet:

*"To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off*

*this mortal coil, must give us pause: there's the respect that makes calamity of so long life."*

Ay, there's the rub, indeed. None of us is immune to the valley of the shadow of death, and yet "we shall fear no evil."

I believe I've mentioned the film before, but "Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality" is a documentary produced in 2003 that I'd recommend highly. You can watch it for free—just google the title. "Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality."

It's a film that describes how a group of social scientists have been applying and testing the theory of psychologist Ernest Becker about how the fear of death motivates even the most ordinary, everyday actions we take—from becoming parents to growing food to writing books to teaching (or preaching) and, alas, to how we sometimes treat others poorly.

Now, what's interesting in the film is that while our fear of death is largely unconscious (we don't walk around thinking about death all day), the behaviors that fear motivates have very real consequences for us psychologically, spiritually, and socially. For instance, wars, Becker believes, are usually the result of somebody's immortality project—somebody's effort to stave off their fear of death—that others, like sheep, get drawn into. Those who start wars aren't usually the ones who fight them, after all.

And smaller scale wars—divorce, personal conflicts, group dynamics that are unhealthy, similarly stem from how somebody's immortality project is being threatened, or enhanced. Again—all of this is largely unconscious. We are sheep.

Now, if Becker's right—and these social scientists are convinced from their empirical studies that he is—then getting to the root of the fear of death ought to bring us closer to peace. So the Psalmist puts it well, realistically, scientifically, even: "Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil, for You are with us."

We're not alone. We're truly, emphatically, absolutely, certainly never completely alone. God is with us. Our shepherd is with us. Even facing death. Even in this COVID-19 valley. So, what is there to fear? "O, death, where is your victory? O, grave, where is your sting?"

"Your rod and your staff they comfort us." I know Pastor Bridget has spoken about this before—I remember it vividly from her sermon in the pulpit—so I can be brief. A shepherd's rod and staff is a single tool used to pull back a wayward sheep, and to fend off enemies. It's now the universal symbol of a bishop—in some contexts.

“You prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies; you anoint our heads with oil; our cups run over.” We are sheep, but God treats us like royalty. A prepared table is a feast. And when we eat in the company of our enemies, that means we are at peace. Our cups run over—there’s plenty to drink. This is a festive gathering. You anoint our heads with oil. We are honored. We are invested. We are celebrated, with fragrant, rich, flowing oil pouring down our necks and onto our shoulders, down our backs, chests, and lower, even—a liquid incense filling the room with luscious fragrance.

“So, surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life; and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Goodness is its own reward, after all. The intrinsic value of doing the right thing means that we can extend mercy to others.

As you may know, if you read This Week at Union, over the past week the Green Bay Common Council passed by a vote of 9-3 an Equal Rights Ordinance. It will get a second reading, and hopefully be signed into law, in two weeks.

This new ordinance prohibits discrimination and protects individuals along lines of “actual or perceived sex, race, religion, creed, color, national origin, ancestry, age, disability, lawful source of income, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, gender non-conformity, transgender status, past or present military service, or status as a victim of domestic abuse, sexual assault, or stalking.” This law with these many categories of “protected status” individuals sets a high bar for Green Bay’s civic life and culture.

Why, you might ask, do we need an Equal Rights Ordinance? If you had attended the Common Council meeting last week—or the Protection and Policy Committee meeting last week, as I did—you would have heard members of our African American community, and our Latin-x community, and our Asian community, and our LGBTQ community speak to the importance of this ordinance FOR THEM.

Surely goodness and MERCY shall follow us all the days of our life. An Equal Rights Ordinance, like the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights, isn’t designed to protect the privileged—although, of course, the privileged receive the same rights as anyone else. An Equal Rights Ordinance is a public declaration that the powerful—the government and we, the people, will extend to all others, including especially the vulnerable, the marginalized, the outcast, the scapegoat, the shunned—the same mercy and protection and care that the Shepherd extends to us. And that would be to dwell in the house of the Lord, forever, wouldn’t it?

*“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloveds ... Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice, for we have a good Shepherd. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with*

*thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about and live these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."*

May it be so. Amen.

Dr. Jon Pahl  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Psalm 23; Philippians 4:1-9**  
October 11, 2020