

“THE POPULARITY OF THE 23RD PSALM”

Date: July 29, 2007

Text: Psalm 23, John 10: 11 - 18

I always ask families when I meet with them to plan a memorial or funeral service if there are particular passages of scripture they would like to have read. Do you know what they always respond whether it is an active church family or one that has no church connection? “We don’t know much about the Bible but he loved the 23rd psalm.” Thus that psalm is part of almost every memorial service and often people are asked to say it out loud with me. It continually moves me that in a supposedly Biblical illiterate society so many people are able to recite the words from memory. What is it that makes the 23rd psalm one of the most popular, most comforting and supportive of all Bible texts?

The psalm begins “THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD.” We may not appreciate what a difficult task a shepherd had in ancient Israel. Sheep couldn’t find grass or water on their own, wolves and other animals were a constant threat. A shepherd had tremendous responsibilities. The psalmist applies that imagery to God. Our creator will look after us and protect us as a shepherd does his sheep. It’s no wonder that Jesus picked up on this imagery and describes his task in terms of looking after all of God’s children.

“The Lord is my shepherd.” What will that mean practically? The psalmist put it simply: “I SHALL NOT WANT.” The Good News translation says, “The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything that I need.” Think about that for awhile. Do we live as though that verse is true? Why is it that it takes a major crisis or illness in our lives to help us realize that our Heavenly Parent really is guiding us through the peaks and valleys of life? So many times an individual who is critically ill has said to me “I never realized what a privilege it is to listen to the birds or share a day with my family.” How much of life is spoiled because we always want something else? I read somewhere that 50 years ago Americans had a basic list of about 10 needs such as food, shelter and family. Today Americans have a list of over 100 needs! The line between need and want has been blurred in our society. It is something to consider at stewardship time: what are our basic needs and how much do we want and where does my gift to Christ’s ministry fit in?

The shepherd leads his sheep to fields of grass. Will God do anything less for his people, the psalmist wonders? Of course, not! “HE WILL MAKE ME TO LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES.” What a glorious image! It’s the sensation of lying on your back in an open field looking up at the clouds moving by. You feel a little bit like Huck Finn with not a care in the world. When it gets too hot lying under the sun, you can soak your feet in a cool spring.

Remember that image the next time you look at all the magazines by the checkout counter of the super market. I guarantee that you will see plenty of articles about dealing with stress. Could it be that we as religious people have the answer to all the stress and pressure of our daily affairs and are not taking advantage of it? Could a few minutes quietly shared with our Creator, letting him become our Shepherd, help us deal with the fears and anxieties of our day – rejection, job loss, health concerns?

Just so we don’t think that the psalmist was engaged in wishful thinking let’s be clear that the writer knew that he had to leave the verdant pastures and the quiet still waters and return to the dirt and noise typified by the 6 o’clock news. His so-called retreat time ended and he returned to

what we would call ‘the working week’ but with renewed appreciation for the Creator’s role. He had a confidence that the Almighty would truly be his Shepherd. The 23rd psalm, as I have reminded people so often in times of trials, does not say that God will take us out “OF THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH” but rather that God will see us to the end. How important it is for someone waiting in a hospital corridor or grieving at a funeral home to know that there is someone walking with them through the tunnel and leading them to new light. Add the 23rd psalm to Jesus’ saying that he was “The Good Shepherd” and you have a powerful statement of God’s presence in our lives each day.

The psalmist also knew that getting along with one another could be one of the most difficult parts of life. He spoke of “A TABLE PREPARED IN THE PRESENCE OF MINE ENEMIES.” This verse of the psalm was commonly read in churches in London during WW II as the Sacrament of Holy Communion was being served. The German buzz bombs were roaring overhead, no one knew where they would land, and sometimes churches were hit. What meaning the words “thou preparest a table in the presence of mine enemies” would have for people in that church! The Sacrament became a sign of God’s eternal protection. They were scared and some might not make it through the war but they knew that their God would take care of them in this life and that which was to come.

Can you begin to see why it is no accident that people want the 23rd psalm read at a memorial service? The psalmist speaks to our deepest needs and not just when crisis hits but as we go about our daily activities.

The whole emphasis of the psalm is “take comfort God will guide, strengthen and protect you.” I can tell you about people who have found incredible strength while going through unbelievable ordeals. I can tell you about people I have known who have endured staggering burdens and yet not been crushed. But let me also tell you that people have found comfort when upset by little things and strength simply to be a good parent and on and on. It’s no wonder that this psalm has spoken to so many people. The psalm touches all of us in the little and big events of life

Two years ago a personal experience demonstrated the power of the 23rd psalm. A young woman was beaten to death by her husband right around the corner from us in North Chili. It was a very sad happening. Melody had grown up in the Gates Church where I served and her parents are long time friends. Back then, a graveside committal service was planned some days after the memorial service at the church. The Gates pastor was called away suddenly that morning because of the death of his father and the associate was out of town. I was asked at the last moment to fill in. The family gathered at a small rural cemetery in Bristol overlooking the hills of Canandaigua Lake. Obviously the family was in anguish but as we shared the 23rd psalm together in that beautiful setting you could feel comfort and strength come over those present. No easy answers to a terrible tragedy, many difficult days ahead but those people sensed within the presence of The Good Shepherd and what a difference that made.

Another week is about to begin. Just another week? No, we go with the Lord as our Shepherd! And so it is back into the real world with a smile, with a serene inner spirit and a commitment to love and peace.