

“ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
April 29, 2012

Good Shepherd Sunday

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

Over the past few weeks, I have had a number of funerals, and I have to tell you something rather sad that I've been discovering of late. More and more people do not know the 23rd Psalm. I've been in ministry 25 years, and when I started, I would invite people at funerals to say with me the 23rd Psalm and everyone, almost without exception, would do it. The other day, at one of the funerals I had, I invited them to say it, and when I started I could hear a few voices say, "The Lord is my shepherd," but about two lines into it, there was dead silence, and I said the rest of it on my own.

How sad! How terribly sad! And not because of what it says about how less and less people are going to church these days, or how the memorization of scripture has fallen out of fashion - but because it is terribly, terribly sad that people are being robbed of the opportunity to know the comforting presence of the God who is our Good Shepherd. They are being robbed of the opportunity of having those words right on the tip of their tongue when life goes haywire, when bad things happen, when things come unglued. They are being robbed of the opportunity of being wrapped securely in the knowledge that the Shepherd of us all holds us in the palm of His hand always and ever. It is incredibly sad!

The words of Psalm 23 and the Good Shepherd lesson from John that we just heard are filled with life-giving and life-saving Good News! They are so powerful, and such a source of strength, that one chaplain who works at Baylor University Hospital has found that he has to replace the Bible in the hospital chapel a couple times of year because the page on which the 23rd Psalm is found is either almost worn completely through, or someone has torn it out and taken it with them! (On-line, "Comfort: When the Darkness is at its Worst," Grady R. Brittain)

It is, in just its few short verses, a beautiful picture of the Lord in whom we live, and move, and have our being. So I would like to invite you, if you do not know this psalm by heart, start to memorize it now. And I would especially like to speak this morning to the parents of the babies who are being baptized, and invite them to make sure that one of the things you teach your children, along with the Lord's Prayer, is the 23rd Psalm. It is one of the greatest gifts you will ever give them.

Because they will learn that they have a shepherd who always, always, always watches over them, and does it with love. They will learn that the shepherd who loves them is not like others who guide animals by whipping them or pushing them, but our shepherd is one who loves us by guiding us and rescuing us with His rod and staff.

They will learn that, if they listen to Him and trust Him, He will guide them all throughout their lives. Teach them to trust that feeling, that nudging that they sense, for that, indeed, will be Him trying to lead them where they need to go.

You know what I mean, don't you? You know how, nine times out of ten, when you have a decision to make in your life, you know what you should do, you feel it in your bones. It's just listening to that, and trusting that, that is the question. The Shepherd is always there, willing to lead us in right paths, if we are willing to listen and go where He leads.

If your children know this psalm, and say it often, they'll be reminded of that every day.

And they'll also learn something else, when they say the words "I shall not want." As they grow up in Christ, with these words on their lips, they'll begin to understand what it does, and doesn't, mean to be "in want." In this world of ours, which is so filled with stuff - you know what I mean, it fills all our houses almost to overflowing - this psalm will help your children know what really matters, and not want for anything. It will help them keep perspective about life, and what abundant life really means - not an abundance of stuff, but the abundance of love, and contentment, and peace, joy and meaning. So, even if, one day, money is short, or they're sleeping on a mattress on the floor when they're first starting out on their own, they will still be able to say, "I shall not want," and mean it - because they will know, that, still they have all that they need for abundant life.

Thirdly, if you teach this psalm to your children, it will help them embrace the words "He leadeth me beside the still waters, He restoreth my soul," and oh my, how they will need that! We all know that, with each passing year, the pace of life in our world gets faster and faster and faster. Everything is instant, and if we have to wait more than an instant for something, we get irritated!

We drive through everyplace - the bank, the coffee shop, the fast food restaurant - I even read recently about a church in California that offered a "drive through confessional" and on Ash Wednesday, several churches offered "drive-through ashes!" I kid you not! For people who were too busy to stop and go to church, they could just drive up and someone would reach in the car window and put ashes on their head!

All of our electronic gadgets are created to make things go faster and faster. This week, our denomination's General Conference is meeting, and right now, they are meeting in legislative committees to vote on issues. I swear to you, it seems like before even the last hand is raised on a vote, someone tweets the results nationwide! Everything is so fast paced these days, and it's hard to imagine how much more fast paced things will get for these children who are being baptized today!

Oh, what a gift for them to know that the Lord of their life will lead them beside still waters and restore their soul. He will, if they will trust Him, He will invite them to slow down and "stop and smell the roses," if you will. He will help them understand that abundant life includes rest and peace - and going nonstop and moving so rapidly ultimately gets you nowhere but exhausted. Oh what a gift you can give your child with these words - He leads me beside the still waters, He restores my soul.

And maybe the best reason of all to teach this psalm to your children is to equip them to face the storms of life that will come their way. They will. It's part of life. They will go through their own valleys of the shadow of death. And when they do, they need to have this psalm ready on their lips, so that they remember they're not in it alone.

They will know that He is with them when that bully takes aim. They will know that He is with them when they get that letter telling them they weren't accepted at the college they had their heart set on. They will know that He is with them when they hear the word cancer or heart disease or MS or news of an accident that takes someone they love. They will know that He is with them as they struggle in their career, or have financial troubles, or go through a divorce. No matter what they face, no matter the valley or valleys through which they travel, they will have the assurance that they are not alone - that He is with them and will carry them through it all.

One pastor, when preaching on this psalm, told about the time when one of his children one day was playing hide and seek with his brothers and sisters and accidentally got locked in a dark closet. It was pitch black inside, and the child got scared, really scared. He screamed for help, and when his father arrived at the door, he could hear his little boy crying loudly, and in a panic. While the dad searched for a screwdriver and a flashlight, he began to talk quietly through the door to his son. "Don't worry. I'm here. I'm not going to leave you. I'll get the door open soon. Don't worry. Don't cry. I'm right here." (Ibid.)

That's what you're giving your child when you teach him or her the 23rd Psalm - the voice of the Shepherd in their ear in all the times of their life saying, "Don't worry. I'm here. I'm not going to leave you. I'll get you through this.

Don't worry. Don't cry. I'm right here."

What a gift! Don't you want to make sure they know that? Don't you want to know that as well?

Finally, when you teach your child the 23rd Psalm, you are letting them know that there is One who will go to the ends of the earth for them - even to the point of death to care for them, and in fact, He did. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for them and for you and me - that's how much He loves us, that's how much He loves them.

It will be a reminder of just how precious they are, so precious that He sacrificed Himself so that they might know abundant and eternal life. And in this world, that will do its level best to make them prove themselves in other ways - with salaries, and degrees, and accomplishments - this psalm will remind them that they are precious just because they are a child of God, and God could not love them more or less because of something they accomplish.

I know I've been directing a lot of what I've said to the parents of the babies being baptized today, because I feel so strongly about this gift they can give their children. But please don't miss the message for you as well - the message in these wonderful words of scripture.

You are a beloved child of God, and the Lord is your shepherd. He watches over you, and will guide you, if you will listen and follow. He will help you understand that you are never in want, because the abundant life He offers is not dependent upon the stuff you accumulate, but the peace and joy and meaning He gives to you. He will slow you down and restore your soul when life threatens to spin out of control. He will walk with you every moment of your life, in the good times, and especially, in the valleys of the shadow of death through which you will walk. And finally, these words will remind you that you are a precious, precious child of God, so precious that He gave His life for you and your salvation.

For these babies, for you, and for me, these words are a true gift from God - a reminder of who we are and whose we are, and a reminder, that we are never, ever alone. So, will you join me now, and say these precious words with me, and if you don't know them by heart, just listen, let them flow over you, and receive them as the gift that they are.

The Lord is my shepherd . . .