The Lord is My Shepherd

Psalm 23 Kimby Young

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I am officially concluding my Psalm sermon series with Psalm 23 today. I will be using some Psalms in the upcoming weeks, but the sermons will shift to liturgical themes next week with Reformation Sunday, then All Saints and Thanksgiving. I realize that Sarah used Psalm 23 in preaching last week, too. I suspect that anything I say today will be different from what Sarah emphasized last week. And actually Sarah using it last week just builds on the sermon series. What is wonderful about scripture is that every time you hear it, God speaks in different ways. Even if you hear the exact same thing, you may get something new out of it. And in this room each of you will hear something different that you need to hear. I discovered in preparing for this sermon that I have preached from Psalm 23 5 times during my years here. Each time with a vastly different emphasis as I concentrated on one line or another. I suspect if you were to preach or teach on this Psalm, you would each share different things. That reminded me not only that every line is important, but that each line might speak to us in a new way each time we approach this beloved Psalm.

I saved Psalm 23 for the last Psalm study in depth because Psalm 23 is one of the most well-known scripture passages in the Bible. I am not positive what makes it so appealing – there is something in these ancient words that connects to us and stirs a connection to our great God of grace. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” I lack nothing. I have everything I need. Perhaps that’s part of the appeal – realizing and affirming that in God and God alone all our needs are met, all our longings come to rest, all our desires are fulfilled. I have everything I need – perhaps not everything I want – but absolutely all I will ever need – and perhaps not as soon as I want it – in my impatience – but again absolutely everything I need when I really need it.

Or perhaps the appeal of Psalm 23 is in the reality of knowing God cares for us – the Shepherd, the Care Giver, the Provider – watching over us, protecting and leading, feeding and healing, nurturing and noticing. Not many of us are shepherds anymore – though thank you to those of you who are. The care, the hard work and attention to detail required is remarkable. In the days of the Bible, the shepherd was a life style – knowing and nurturing each beloved animal, pulling out the best that each animal could be, living among the sheep, anticipating problems and bringing deliverance from danger of any kind, fighting off predators, finding safe pasture. The sheep know the shepherd’s voice and trust to follow the shepherd – knowing they will be safe, and will get where they need to be. The analogy from tending the sheep to caring for people is obvious. God cares for us always in every way we need.

The appeal of this Psalm might be the very vivid imagery. We can almost see the green pasture and feel our toes dig into the beautiful earth. We almost relax at the very thought. The still waters are clear and offer refreshment and restoration. The table spread before us conjures remembrance of every feast we have ever enjoyed, every family meal, every picnic, every potluck, and of course every table of Jesus Christ open for the sacrament of communion. Spread for us – shared with us. The oil pouring over us like grace and baptism, blessing and healing, reminds us of both comfort and call in the presence of God. God prepares us and provides for us. The overflowing cup of goodness is full of joy. Again an image of bounty and blessing. Even the valley of the shadow of death conjures images of fear and loneliness, alongside protection and power of God who walks with us. We will not be afraid. And of course, the final line – I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever – paints a picture of our eternal home with God. Yes, each line of the Psalm is powerful and profound.

I decided I might try something different this morning. I invite you to help deliver the sermon this morning. Earlier today I drew your attention to the bulletin insert with Psalm 23. And you thought about a line or two of the Psalm. Now I would like to share what came to you in your reflections. We’re going to share line by line and then reflect on the Psalm as a whole.

The rest of the sermon will vary – depending on people’s answers as we go line by line through the Psalm. If you are reading through this I invite you to read line by line and reflect on the Psalm, asking God to speak to you what you need to hear today.

More can be said about this Psalm, more can be learned from it.

But we are out of time here and now.

God has a message for each of us today. It may not be the same message for all of us.

Our invitation today is to open our ears and our hearts to God’s Word today,

And hear whatever you need to hear,

by the grace of God, the inspiration of the Spirit and the word of Jesus Christ for you.

This day and always. Amen.