



**April 13, 2008**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Psalm 23

## “Whatever Life Brings”

I have a friend, another United Methodist clergywoman, who attended Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary with me in Evanston during the mid 1980’s. When we would attend worship, which was offered twice a week, she would agonize over the experience. “I hope the worship is not going to CHALLENGE me this morning,” she’d say. “I don’t need to be challenged by my sin today, confronted by my faithlessness. I need to be FED! Oh, dear God in heaven, may we receive food for our souls and spirits, rather than a call to sacrifice and suffering!”

I usually felt great sympathy for her. All of us generally prefer comfort and sustenance over confrontation or judgment. I do recognize that I am not the one to really know WHICH message I need most at a given moment—all of the above are messages of God, spoken by the Holy Spirit in our hearts and souls. I try to be receptive to whatever God is saying as I worship. But I confess, there are times of fear, pain and sorrow that lead me to long for words of love and promises of God’s care.

There is one passage in Scripture that speaks of God’s love and care in a way that reaches deeply into our hearts. These words have been treasured by untold millions for centuries. They are found in the Psalms--- the twenty-third Psalm. It is nearly always read, sung, or spoken in unison at funerals, perhaps because we most need to hear it during times of loss.

I feel an awe-filled reluctance to attempt preaching on the 23rd Psalm This psalm is poetry; it is music; it is manna to hungry souls of wilderness wanderers; it is rain

on parched and cracked earth; it is a lullaby to exhausted and frightened children; it is a candle of hope in a vast, dark musty dungeon; it is God's promise to love us, care for us, and sustain us through whatever life brings. So, what am I doing, then, preaching on this Psalm? Please do not consider this a sermon. This is a time for us to thank God for the Psalm. I'm saying, "Thank you, God, for the 23rd Psalm." And I'm saying that, not just for me, but for all of us.

First, I thank God for being honest in this Psalm. That may be why it has such power for us at times of death and loss. It doesn't present any illusions about life or about God's people. We are not expected to be above pain, sorrow or loneliness. The troubles that threaten to overwhelm us are named: the valley of the shadow of death, evil, enemies. Yet the Psalm vibrates and sings with confidence that God protects his own. Whatever life brings, we will not be overwhelmed; we will not be alone.

This Psalm shows us God in several guises. Rev. Gordon Pratt Baker, a United Methodist minister and author, provides us with words to assist us in giving God thanks for the promises expressed here. We thank him for being a **God** who **guides**, who **guards**, who **gives**, who **girds**, and who **gladdens**.

I thank God for **guiding** us. *He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

In the Middle East shepherds did not leave their sheep. They would not let the flock stay too long in one place, lest they exhaust the food supply. When the dry season approached they moved the flocks to greener pastures. The shepherds knew where to find plant life in the craggy, rocky land. They knew where to find oases, water in the desert. They knew which paths led to safety among the many that were unreliable- the cliffs, drop offs and pitfalls. They knew where there were landslides.

We know life. We know it presents as much danger to us as Middle Eastern terrain to poor, dumb sheep. We cannot make our way alone. We cannot survive without a Shepherd. We thank God who guides us willingly, whatever the cost.

We are grateful God is one who **guards**. *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; they rod and thy staff they comfort me.* Middle eastern shepherds faced on-the-job dangers. The desert sun was blinding in open country. But overhanging cliffs and gorges cast sudden darkness of impenetrable shadows over the twisting, winding paths. There were predators, there were bandits, there were dangers of straying and getting lost, of

falling, breaking legs, getting caught in rocks. The shepherds protected the sheep from dangers that might pounce from any side. They also protected the sheep from themselves, from their own ignorance and folly in plunging recklessly into danger.

We know life. There are dangers beyond us that threaten to harm us. There are dangers within our personalities and behaviors that can demolish our lives. There are illnesses, crimes, pollution, unsafe substances and equipment used in industry and various jobs. There are natural disasters, car accidents, wars. There is peer pressure that steers us down paths we didn't intend to travel. There are resentments and grudges held deeply by people we care about. There are resentments and grudges harbored in our own hearts. There are compulsions and habits that hurt us and others. There is fear—fear of what life may bring next- to us or to those we love. There is fear of harm, fear of danger, fear of death. We thank God for guarding us. We DO need protection. May we know God's protection, believe in it, trust it. May we travel forward in life, knowing God is right with us, guarding the sheep.

We are grateful God is one who **gives**. *Thou preparest a table before me, in the presence of my enemies.* There are many thoughts that come through these words. One that comes to mind is that God doesn't GET RID of our enemies. They are still there. But God provides for us, feeds us, nourishes us, builds us up in the middle of whatever dangers life may bring. Another possibility is that God sets the table before our enemies so they might decide not to be enemies any longer. They might see and smell the nourishing food on the table; they might see the open places around it; they might look on the face of the gracious host and join the meal. God can give us what is needed to change enemies into sisters and brothers gathered at a family table.

Or, if we remember the Middle Eastern shepherds, we can understand how God gives us good food in the midst of hazards. The shepherds did not turn their sheep loose into new pastures. They went ahead to check out the terrain and the grasses. They used their staffs to uproot poisonous plants, burning them to keep the sheep from eating them. They used their staffs to clear out poisonous snakes, killing them with sticks.

We thank God for giving us what we need in the midst of dangers, enemies, threats to our life. God is always laying wholesome things in front of us, urging us to eat. God calls us to meaningful work and service in our communities and in our churches. God urges us to join in fellowship and sharing that builds people up. God calls us to pray, and to do things that nourish our spirits—like listening to music, camping, hiking, singing, whistling, gardening, fishing. God gives us more than we could list. God gives good things to his flock. We receive, and we are thankful.

We thank God for being one who **girds**. *Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.* We don't use the word "gird" anymore. But it's a good word that means, "to brace, equip; to make ready". God acts in ways to make us ready for whatever life brings. Middle Eastern shepherds gave individual attention to their sheep. They gathered them together into the fold for the night. They allowed the sheep into shelter one by one, using their rods to bar their entry until they were inspected for bruises, scratched knees or signs of fatigue. They used olive oil and cedar tar to treat open wounds. They offered water from their cupped hands to keep them from drinking too much at the stream or pool.

God offers us what we need to be restored. We need to take this seriously. We need to pray, asking for insight as to how to be equipped for the next leg of our life's journey. Generals know that nothing can be gained from driving an army to exhaustion. But we sometimes drive ourselves beyond our strength. God tells us to rest, to receive oil for our wounds. We thank God for the girding- we need it. For life is a hard and demanding journey.

We are grateful God is one who **gladdens**. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* Shepherds gave their flocks a sense of safety. At the end of the trail, they gathered in a safe place, all together. This is God's ultimate promise- that we will all one day be together in the safety of his heavenly home.

One more thing strikes me about these last words. *Goodness and mercy shall FOLLOW ME all the days of my life.* This tells me that God not only leads the way, but he follows behind me—running after me with goodness and mercy. God keeps running after us, all through our lives. He doesn't stop. He keeps after us until we stop, reaching out to receive what he offers. Through Jesus Christ God offers us life. A quality of life here in this world that is transformed by his love. And life beyond this world, which is a mystery, but an absolute promise. That is good news—news to warm the weariest, saddest heart.

I thank God for the words of the twenty-third Psalm. God's love will not fail us or forsake us, whatever life brings. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.