

The Shepherd's Sheep
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
April 21, 2013

Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

John 10:22-30

22 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter,²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' ²⁵Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one.'

If you know the twenty-third psalm by heart, it's likely the version you know comes from the King James Version of the Bible, rather than our more currently used New Revised Standard Version. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine

enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

It might not surprise you to learn that “yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” has been like a drumbeat in my head this week. It might surprise you, though, that I heard it differently. Yea, though I watch footage of bombs at the Boston Marathon; yea, though I read about a suspected gunman on the campus of Carroll; yea, though I hear reports of nuclear weapons in North Korea, I fear no evil – but I do, I do, I do. And, while not evil per se, yea, though I hear reports of death and destruction from an earthquake in Iran and an earthquake in China and a fertilizer plant explosion in West, Texas...not green pastures; definitely not still waters.

This week it was easy to forget that it’s all about God when it was so easy for it to be about us. It has been so easy to stop where my mind stopped - I will fear no evil – and to get hung up there. But the poem, the song, the psalm does not stop there. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” For thou art with me. For you are with me. For you, God, are with me, with us, with all of us. In Boston, in Watertown, at Carroll, in North Korea, in Iran, in China, in West.

Evil is not the right word, though. Brokenness – brokenness is what I fear. Brokenness in a kid, a nineteen-year-old kid, and in his not-much-older brother. Brokenness in a person who would bring a gun to a college, as the reports first went. Brokenness in a nation’s leader, brokenness passed down by his father and his father before him. Brokenness is what I fear.

Anne Lamott, Presbyterian author known for faithfulness expressed in human honesty and frailty, whom I have quoted before, posted this on Facebook on Wednesday: “Frederick Buechner wrote, ‘Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.’ But it is hard not to be afraid, isn't it? Some wisdom traditions say that you can't have love and fear at the same time, but I beg to differ. You can be a passionate believer in God, in Goodness, in Divine Mind, and the immortality of the soul, and still be afraid. I'm Exhibit A.” she writes.

She continues, “The temptation is to say...Oh, it will all make sense someday. Great blessings will arise from the tragedy, seeds of new life sown. And I absolutely believe those things, but if it minimizes the terror, it's [a lie]...There is amazing love and grace in people's response to the killings. It's like white blood cells pouring in to surround and heal the infection. It just breaks your heart every time, in the good way, where Hope tiptoes in to peer around. For the time being, I am not going to

pretend to be spiritually more evolved than I am. I'm keeping things very simple: right foot, left foot, right foot, breathe...”¹

Actor and comedian Patton Oswalt offered his very serious thoughts on Monday via Facebook as well. He writes, “I remember, when 9/11 went down, my reaction was, ‘Well, I’ve had it with humanity.’ But I was wrong. I don’t know what’s going to be revealed to be behind all of this mayhem. One human insect or a poisonous mass of broken sociopaths.” He goes on, “But here’s what I DO know. If it’s one person or a HUNDRED people, that number is not even a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a percent of the population on this planet. You watch the videos of the carnage and there are people running TOWARDS the destruction to help out... This is a giant planet and we’re lucky to live on it but there are prices and penalties incurred for the daily miracle of existence. One of them is, every once in awhile, the wiring of a tiny sliver of the species gets snarled and they’re pointed towards darkness. But the vast majority stands against that darkness and, like white blood cells attacking a virus, they dilute and weaken and eventually wash away the evil doers and, more importantly, the damage they wreak... We would not be here if humanity were inherently evil. We’d have eaten ourselves alive long ago.” He concludes, “So when you spot violence, or bigotry, or intolerance or fear or just garden-variety misogyny, hatred or ignorance, just look it in the eye and think, ‘The good outnumber you, and we always will.’”²

We try to be the white blood cells; we try to be sheep. For you are with me. For you add to my number and you are with me and together we outnumber violence and bigotry and intolerance, misogyny, hatred, and ignorance, even fear. You are our shepherd and we are your sheep. We read in John that Jesus has said, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” Who are the sheep that follow the shepherd’s voice? Can we say? **We** cannot. And really, I cannot even say exactly what it means to be Jesus’ sheep and what it looks like to be the sheep who hear his voice. Our faith is built on the belief that those sheep who will thus be given eternal life and will never perish are those of us who identify ourselves as followers of Christ. Maybe we’re right. And maybe our version of God’s salvation is smaller than God’s version. I don’t know and it doesn’t matter because what I do know is that I hear God’s voice through Jesus. And what that voice is saying is, “Fear not. I am with you.”

In eerie wisdom, Dean Catherine L. Kelsey at Iliff School of Theology wrote years ago, “Psalm 23 is the most familiar of the many psalms that reassure us of God’s continuing presence, no matter what is happening to our bodies, our relationships, our community, or our world. It is easy in the midst of trauma to give our confidence over to doctors or leaders as if they hold everything in their hands.”

¹ Anne Lamott, Facebook post, April 17, 2013.

² Patton Oswalt, Facebook post, April 15, 2013.

She continues, “We seek to discern the hand of God in the work of those who help in times of trauma, but we do not expect them to do everything on our behalf. Many of us forget this when we are frightened...Psalm 23 helps restore us to our selves; we are active as ones who trust in God. Through it all, God and God alone is our true safety, our true shepherd.”³ Fear not, God says. I am with you. Fear not; I weep with you. Fear not; while I will bring great blessings out of tragedy, the tragedy breaks my heart, too. Fear not, for we together have work to do, whether white blood cells or woolly sheep, you are needed to bring about those great blessings. Fear not, for I am greater than any brokenness. Praise be to God!

Let us pray: As we walk through darkness, be with us, we pray. Amen.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 436.