Sunday, May 2, 2004
GREEN PASTURES AND STILL WATERS
Psalm 23

The Twenty-Third Psalm is one of the most loved passages in the Bible. It's about life and death, good times and bad times, and the assurance of God's loving presence through every moment of your life. It's a song of faith and a statement of confidence. Whenever I meet with family members to talk about the memorial or funeral service for one of their family members, and I ask them what I should read from the Bible, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the answer is, "read the 23rd Psalm."

In 1988, a book was published which became a best-seller on the non-fiction list. The author was Natan Sharansky, and the title, Fear No Evil. This title comes from that part of the 23rd Psalm which states, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou art with me." Sharansky was a Jewish prisoner who spent nine years in a Soviet Union KGB prison. He was charged with treason on the false accusation that he was an American spy. He was arrested and threatened with execution in 1977. Finally, he was released and now lives in Israel with his family. He credits a large part of his survival to the comfort and strength which came from his knowing and continually repeating the 23rd Psalm.

If you want to memorize some part of the Bible, I would suggest you choose the 23rd Psalm. At a church program, a young girl wanted to recite from memory this Psalm. She began, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Then, forgetting the rest, she stopped. This happened several times. Finally, she said confidently, "The Lord is my shepherd, what more do I want?"

Even if you cannot say the entire Psalm perfectly, most people know it well enough to recite it along with a congregation, the way many of you sing along with "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a football game.

Many times in my ministry, I have been at the bedside of a dying person, and as I have held the hand of that person along with family members present in the room, we have said together the 23rd Psalm. Family members have told me that this simple act has brought more comfort than any other thing that could've been done.

Here's one example I will never forget. I had been visiting this elderly woman on a regular basis. She was now 96 years old. In some of the visits, we had talked with each other about the most important things we had learned in life — the little and big truths that had guided us. Some were humorous, and others more serious. We each had our favorites. Here are some of them. Some are hers, and some are mine, and most of them are not original.

"It's not what you have in your life, but who you have in your life that counts."

"Money is a lousy way to keep score."

"The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat."

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."

"Remember the compliments you receive. Forget the insults. If you succeed in doing this, tell me how."

“No matter how far or how fast you go, you can’t outrun God.”

One day when I was visiting her, she and I both knew that she did not have long to live. On this particular visit, she said something she had not said before. I don’t remember her exact words, but it went something like this, and it’s worth remembering:

“There have been many times in my life, especially when I was much younger, when I felt that I had done so many things wrong, I figured God had given up on me. But as I have grown older, and especially now that I know I am close to dying, I have more and more experienced God’s presence as unconditional love. When I was young, I thought I had to be perfect for people to love me and for God to love me. I thought that if I ever did something wrong, their love would be withdrawn. So every time I did something wrong, I would make excuses. I would lie. I would try to find someone else to blame. I didn’t realize what an unpleasant person I was when I acted this way. But I’ve finally learned that you don’t have to be perfect to be worth loving.” Then she added, “What has helped me more than anything else to remember this are the words of the 23rd Psalm.” So, as we held hands, we recited together the words of that beautiful Psalm, and a few hours later, she died.

“The Lord is my shepherd.” Most of you listening have never seen a shepherd in the traditional meaning of that term. The Hebrew people who gave us the Psalms were nomads, owning no property, bound to no one location, but traveling with their flocks and herds wherever they could find green pastures and fresh water. The life of the sheep depended to a large degree on the shepherd. So, it is not surprising that in their poetry, the Hebrews pictured God as a shepherd.

They knew that to say, “The Lord is my shepherd,” is to say that you live in an unpredictable, often terrifying world where bad things can happen to you. The metaphor of God being like a shepherd tells you that the loving presence of God makes the world less frightening.

The message of the 23rd Psalm is not that bad things will never happen to you. It is that you will not have to face bad things all by yourself. “Even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

While it is true that the shepherd cannot keep every one of the sheep safe all the time, the shepherd grieves for each one in its afflictions.

One of the most inspiring sculptures ever created by an artist is the Pietà by Michelangelo. He was 23 years old when he completed it in 1498. It shows Mary, the mother of Jesus, holding the broken body of her son on her lap, looking at him with tenderness and sorrow. The combination of love and grief on her face, the longing to take onto herself some of her son’s pain that she might lessen it, speaks to anyone who has loved another person. I’ve seen this amazing sculpture several times. Every time I’ve seen it, tears have come into my eyes.

There is one problem with this sculpture. The scene it portrays probably never happened. If you read the gospel accounts of the crucifixion in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you will find that only in John’s gospel is Mary even present at the crucifixion, and even then, she is sent away before Jesus dies. In the other three versions, she is not listed among the Galilean women witnessing the death of her son. All accounts of Jesus being taken down from the cross and buried mention other people being involved, but not his mother. Nowhere is it recorded that his mother held him on her lap after he died.

Why then does the sculpture move people so deeply, and how can it seem so right and true if it portrays an event that probably never took place? Could it be that the woman in the sculpture, the figure holding the broken body of Jesus, looking at it so sadly and tenderly, is not Mary but God in a feminine mode, the God who created life in all of its fragile vulnerability, the way a mother creates life? A God who grieves with her children when they suffer, who suffers with them when they are cruel to one another, when they hurt and kill one another. Every mother, every parent who suffers the loss of a child, is re-enacting God's grief at the death of a child, and God is grieving with every parent who has lost a child. God's promise in the 23rd Psalm is not that you will always be safe, but that you will never be alone.

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." All people I know "want" things. Is the Psalm indicating that if you have enough faith in God, that will get rid of all desire and you will be content with what you have and long for nothing more? Not necessarily! There are Hebrew scholars who maintain that a more accurate translation might be, "The Lord is my shepherd. What more do I need?" The issue of whether I desire things beyond that is beside the point. It reminds me of a sign in the window of a general store in a small town years ago. The sign said, "If we don't have it, you're better off without it." In our consumer culture, it's so easy to confuse "wants" with "needs." Just because you want something does not automatically imply that you need it.

Prayers that begin "Thank You for..." strike me as more authentically religious than prayers that begin, "Please give me..."

Some of you may be familiar with the song, "Unanswered Prayers," sung by the country music singer Garth Brooks. It tells the story of a man in his mid-forties who sees a woman at a community event who looks vaguely familiar, but he can't quite place her. Then he realizes that this is the girl he had a crush on in the 7th grade. Every night as a 7th grader, he would go to bed praying to God to make her love him as he loved her, and not understanding why God would not grant the heart-felt prayer of a devout 13-year-old boy. Now thirty years later, seeing who he has grown up to be, seeing who she has grown up to be, he comes to understand that "some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers."

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in commenting on this statement in the 23rd Psalm, wrote: "My version of the Psalm's second line, 'I shall not want,' is this: the Lord is my shepherd, I shall often want. I shall yearn, I shall long, I shall aspire. I shall continue to miss the people and the abilities that are taken from my life as loved ones die and skills diminish. I shall probe the empty spaces in my life like a tongue probing a missing tooth. But I will never feel deprived or diminished if I don't get what I yearn for, for I know I am blessed by what I have."

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."

Not only for sheep, but for human beings, nothing is more comforting than green pastures and still waters. The earth, decorated with green grass, blue waters, and blue skies, gently bathes our eyes with quiet, low-intensity colors. I read somewhere that landscape architects in their surveys have discovered that the most satisfying view from a patio or picture window is green grass leading to water seen through trees.

When the Psalmist thanks God, the faithful shepherd, for making him lie down in green pastures by still water, he may be thanking God not only for the food and the drink of the

water, but also for the calming effect of the green pastures and still waters. It's a beautiful place of rest. It is a place where you can truly do what the next line of the Psalm says: "He restores my soul." Is there anyone among you who does not need your soul restored?

I recently read about a group of tourists on safari in Africa. They had hired several native porters to carry their supplies while they traveled. After three days, the porters told them they would have to stop and rest for a day. The porters said it was not because they were tired, but that "we have walked too far, too fast, and now we must wait for our souls to catch up to us."

It's true! You can be so busy taking care of things that you neglect your soul or leave your soul behind. One of the great gifts of the Jewish religion to all people is the concept of the Sabbath, one day of rest after six days of work. Its purpose is to "restore the soul." Take time out to restore your soul.

There are times when you also need the help of others to restore your soul, and you can be instrumental in helping someone else in restoring his or her soul. If you know someone who has suffered a loss, whether the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, or the loss of a relationship, and you hesitate to contact your friend because you feel inadequate to the situation, because you are not sure you have the words to help her, please overcome that hesitation and reach out to your friend. Call her. Visit her. You don't have to say anything except, "I'm sorry, I feel bad for you." Human souls are nourished by relationships. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul."

Thus far, I have only dealt with the first half of the 23rd Psalm in this sermon. The second half will have to wait for another sermon. In the next sermon on the 23rd Psalm, I'll begin with the phrase, "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." In the meantime, I encourage you to read the 23rd Psalm, to use it for your personal meditation, and even to memorize it. Amen.