Sunday, June 6, 2004
THE 23RD PSALM, PART II
Psalm 23

Five weeks ago, I delivered the first sermon in a two-part sermon series based on the 23rd Psalm. Today's sermon is part II of that series. In the first sermon, I made some introductory comments about the significance of Psalm 23. I said that this 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.

I also noted that 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 the bad things in life — and the good things — all by yourself. The metaphor of God being like a shepherd tells you that the loving presence of God makes the world less frightening. The promise of the Psalm is that "goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life."

That first sermon explained the opening verses of the Psalm: "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."

This sermon begins with the next verse of the 23rd Psalm: "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." Another translation, which I believe is more accurate, says, "He leads me in right paths for His name's sake."

In commenting on this verse, Rabbi Kushner recalls a story in the Jewish tradition about a traveler who asks a child, "Is there a shortcut to a particular village?" The child answers, "Yes, there is, but it's not a shortcut if you hurry." In other words, "It's a long way that is short."

You and I can relate to that. The right path, or the right way, is not necessarily the shortest way. You've had the experience of trying to take a shortcut, whether in traveling or in some other aspect of your life, only to find yourself in a mess you had not anticipated. In business, in your health, in your education, or in preparation for an event, you might be in a hurry to get there. So, you try a shortcut and discover, to your dismay, that it wasn't a shortcut at all.

It's a truth that applies to every endeavor. Have you ever said to someone you've gone to for advice, "Do I really have to take all these steps? Isn't there an easier way or a shortcut?" The answer often is: "Sure, there could be shortcuts, but it is not the right way to go. You will discover that it will be more costly in the long run. The right path is not always the shortest or easiest road to the goal you hope to accomplish."

In plane geometry, you learned that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But in life, the shortest distance to your goal could be the longest, because it is an indirect, roundabout way. The shortcut you might be tempted to take could have hidden traps or unintended consequences. It might be too easy and never challenge you to discover your strengths or give you time to let those strengths emerge.

The promising golfer, to whom success has always come too easily, sometimes has to go back to the qualifying school to learn to cope with adversity. A person may go through two or three

jobs before discovering what she really wants to do. She may realize that those early failures were indispensable in helping her achieve success.

I am convinced Jesus had this verse from the 23rd Psalm in mind, “He leads me in right paths for His name’s sake,” when he said in the Sermon on the Mount: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

I believe Jesus also had this verse in mind when he said to his disciples, “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” You can be tempted to take a shortcut and give advice too quickly, before the person is ready to hear it.

It is a comforting assurance to know that God, like a shepherd, “leads you in the right paths.”

Not only does God lead you in the right paths, you are not alone on that path. The 23rd Psalm continues with this assurance: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff — they comfort me.”

Notice especially that the Psalm states, “the valley of the shadow of death.” The word “shadow” is the important one. It is not the fact of death, but the knowledge that you will one day die, that casts a shadow over your life. Time and time again, people say to me, “It’s not so much death that I fear, I fear dying. I fear the kinds of dying I’ve seen people experience — long, painful illnesses before death comes, or just being old and not wanting death to come.”

Human beings are unique in that we are the only creatures who know, throughout our lives, that one day we will die. When you were a child, you did not understand the permanence of death. Teenagers feel they can be extravagant with time, because they believe they have an endless supply of tomorrows. But as you mature, you begin to take into account the “shadow of death,” although I am still amazed by the number of people who say, “If something should happen to me.”

The acceptance of the fact that one day you will die can change your attitude toward life. Some people choose the way of self-indulgence and live recklessly. Others respond with despair and ask, “What’s the point of doing anything since nothing is permanent?” There was a young person who asked, “What’s the point of doing homework?” after learning that the sun is going to disappear and all life will end in six billion years.

Then, there are those who say, “Since my days are limited, I am going to make the most of them and do what good I can.” A verse in another Psalm gives that advice: “Teach us to number our days (that is, to make every day count) that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90:12)

A poet wrote: “Death is the mother of beauty.” There’s some truth to that. You enjoy the beauty of nature. You appreciate the giving and receiving of love from other human beings, especially because you know those moments on earth will come to an end.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.”

There are those who have been hurt by life who choose to remain in the shadow. It's tempting. The valley of the shadow can be a seductive place — impossible to enjoy but difficult to leave. The words of the Psalm, however, encourage you to "walk through the valley of the shadow of death," not to remain there forever. God walks with you. The valley of the shadow of death is a temporary place. It is not meant to be permanent. Human beings were not created to live all the time in the shadows or in darkness.

The 23rd Psalm is telling you: don't be afraid to love people, to be vulnerable, even though love inevitably brings pain. Trust God to walk with you through the valley of the shadow of death.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." With this phrase, the 23rd Psalm takes a strange turn. The biblical scholars I consulted advise that there is a wrong way of understanding this phrase and a correct way. The wrong way is to understand the Psalmist as saying, "Not only does God supply me with a lavish banquet; what makes it even more enjoyable is that all those people who don't like me will see how God treats me and realize that I am God's favorite." Rabbi Kushner says it's like the attitude of the person anticipating his high-school class reunion and saying to himself, "I can't wait until the guys who bullied me and those girls who wouldn't go out with me see me drive up in my Mercedes."

A better way of understanding this phrase, according to the biblical scholars, is to hear it as saying, "God the good shepherd prepares a table before me in contrast to some of the people around me to whom I turned for emotional nourishment, only to be disappointed." In other words, when something bad happened to me, there were people I thought of as friends, but instead, they implied by their attitude that I deserved the bad things that came into my life. They did not nourish me as I needed to be nourished.

There were others who wanted to help but didn't know what to do or say. Still others were so shaken by what happened to me that they couldn't even look at me without worrying that something similar might happen to them. However, when other people fail us or let us down, God still prepares a table for me.

The Psalm continues: "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." There's not much anointing of heads with oil these days, except in beauty salons, but in biblical times, it was a big honor and an important ritual. In an Old Testament story, the prophet Samuel anoints first Saul and later David to be king of Israel. The anointing did not make an individual king but indicated that God had chosen the anointed person to be king. So, to anoint someone is to say that the one anointed is special, designated for greatness.

When the Psalmist says, "You anoint my head with oil," it means, "God, You have not only given me the gifts of food and Your presence, but You have also given me the gift of being unique and special, and I accept the responsibility that comes with the anointing."

"You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." God always gives you more than you need. Therefore, the image of your cup being full to overflowing is a reminder to be grateful. Gratitude is more than remembering to mumble, "Thank you," when someone has honored you with an act of politeness. It's a way of looking at the world, an attitude toward life. It is rooted in the knowledge that life is a gift.

The remarkable fact about gratitude is that, like forgiveness, it is good for you and good for others. God doesn't need your thankfulness. You need it. Grateful people are happy people. Ungrateful people are crabby people.

If gratitude is so beneficial and so basic — if it adds joy to your life — why is it difficult for so many people to be grateful? Two reasons come to mind. If you've grown up believing you deserve only the best, you will respond to every gift, whether from God or from a friend, like the child who receives a new toy and complains, "I wanted the deluxe model." Ungrateful people are never satisfied.

Still, others have difficulty being grateful because they believe they are self-sufficient. They are convinced they are self-made. One man said of himself, "He was a self-made man and worshiped his creator." They don't need anything from anyone.

Here's the good news! For those who have cultivated the habit of gratitude, no matter how large a cup you set out to receive God's blessings, it will always overflow.

The final promise of the 23rd Psalm is the most beautiful: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

What a promise! As you make your way through life, following along with you are "goodness and mercy." The language of this phrase in the original Hebrew is even stronger. It says, "Goodness and mercy shall pursue me."

There's a Jewish story about a rabbi who stops a prominent member of his congregation and says, "Whenever I see you, you're always in a hurry. You're always rushing somewhere. What are you running after all the time?" The man answers, "I'm running after success. I'm running after prosperity. I'm in a hurry to make a lot of money." The rabbi responds, "That's a good answer if you assume that all those rewards are out there ahead of you and you have to run fast to catch up with them. But what if the rewards are behind you, looking for you, pursuing you, but they can never catch up with you because you're running away from them?"

Then the final promise: When God is your shepherd, you will dwell in the presence of the loving God forever. Amen.