

Fish Hoek Methodist Church – 3 May 2020

## The Lord is my Shepherd

Readings: Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

Good morning to you friends and welcome to our Sunday message on this the 3 May 2020. We have moved into stage 4 of Lockdown and we are dealing with the new changes that this will bring to each one of us. However, we are still living in uncertain times and it is my prayer that as we gather today, there will be some peace that comes to us in our troubled times.

Come let us gather our thoughts and remember that as we pray together we are meeting separated geographically, but in the presence of God we are still together as one.

Prayer – Jean S

Reading – Psalm 23 by Mike Davies-Coleman

To say that the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is “beloved” or “well-known” is a bit of an under-exaggeration. The psalm has been set to music, artists have painted scenes depicting this beloved Psalm, books have been written about it, and many people have even committed it to memory. This psalm has brought consolation to people dying in hospital, or soldiers on the battle field, students facing exams, pensioners living lonely lives, the poor wondering the streets looking for work and probably even Presidents of countries trying to figure out what their next move was going to be – post Covid-19.

You may be surprised at the huge variety of places where Psalm 23 has used – it is not just used at family funerals, or at traditional Church services on Sundays. This Psalm has captured the imagination of all kinds of people and so let me share with you a few examples:

“Jesus Walks” by Kanye West

“Gangster’s Paradise” by Coolio

“Sickman” by Alice in Chains

“Love Rescue Me” by U2

“Sheep” by Pink Floyd

“Ripple” by the Grateful Dead

“Shadow of Death” by Megadeth

“Jah Guide” by Peter Tosh.

Bach’s Cantata No. 208, “May Sheep Safely Graze”

Note the wide range of musical genres - and I haven’t mentioned all the Christian artists who have used this Psalm to share a message of hope. Literally 100’s of hymns/songs have been written on this particular Psalm. And also in many films too:

*The War Horse*

*Pale Rider*  
*Full Metal Jacket*  
*Jarhead*  
*We Were Soldiers*  
*The Wicker Man.*  
And everyone's favourite - *Titanic.*

- Father Thomas Byles was a priest travelling from England to New York to officiate at his brother's wedding, when the Titanic hit the iceberg and sank – there are first-hand accounts from people witnessing Father Thomas praying Psalm 23 with a group of people as the ship went down. Apparently he had two opportunities to get into a life-boat, but chose to stay on board the ship. Psalm offered solace to them all in their final moments.

Probably the 23rd Psalm was written while David was at Mahanaim wondering how the battle was between his forces and those of his son, Absalom, during the civil war caused by Absalom's rebellion. Of course, David was grief-stricken and heartbroken. It may have been the darkest hour of his life and this is where he penned the beautiful words

What is remarkable is how a piece of writing, written about 1000 B.C. has managed to speak into the lives of people 2500 thousand years later. This is phenomenal if you think about it – people often say that Scripture is not relevant and is outdated – well Psalm 23 would argue against that completely. Why is this Psalm so loved? Why has it been used on occasions like this for centuries? I believe it has to do with its beautiful simplicity, and also its incredible HOPE found in the message of the 6 verses.

Castle Lager may have once claimed they had “the taste that has stood the test of time!” But Psalm 23 beats the socks of that claim any day!

So, Psalm 23 nestles in the middle of the cry of abandonment (Psalm 22) and the prayer of acceptance (Psalm 24). It must take a powerful message to move one from the one place to the other. Let's note a few things from this beloved Psalm.

<sup>1</sup> *The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. (I shall not want. I have everything I need)*

The image of a shepherd may not mean much to most of us city dwellers, but it speaks volumes to farmers and rural communities. A shepherd was (and is) willing to lay down his life in order to protect the sheep – in making sure of this, he will keep a constant watch over each member of the flock, knowing them all by name.

Not only are they known individually by the Shepherd, but due to their importance to the community, the shepherd searches out the best, safest pastures for his flock. In this way, they lack nothing! They have food and water, shelter, love and protection. What more do you need?

Jesus refers to himself as shepherd in John's Gospel – in fact, not just any Shepherd, but the Good Shepherd. He uses this image, because his audience knew the pastoral life and they

also knew Psalm 23. Jesus shows the people that he has come to be the Shepherd – the GREAT shepherd of all the sheep.

- John 10:11 - “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
- John 10:14 - “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—

The Lord IS (present tense)

I AM (present tense)

Hope in the now.....

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. - Psalm 23:2-3*

It is important to notice that the shepherd is the one who leads us to the quiet waters. He goes before us, preparing the path and looking out for potential dangers. The goal of the shepherd is to lead us to the well-hidden pools of cool water and luscious pasture.

Robert Alter says that verse 3 (‘he refreshes my soul’) could be interpreted more as ‘my life he brings back’ – I love that image! It is speaking not just of a refreshing, but rather of a bringing back to life – to a complete spiritual wholeness. The refreshing of our souls increases our vitality and allows us the privilege of enjoying the abundant life.

Jesus invites his followers to experience this refreshing and he invites them to rest in him. It is in times of rest that we are refreshed and invigorated for the next part of the journey:

Matthew 11:28 - Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

- *He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. - Psalm 23:4*

The reference to ‘right paths’ should not narrowly be seen as simply the ‘correct path’, but rather as the way that leads to *righteousness*. In a deeper sense God leads us onto pathways of justice and then peace. When we listen to his voice, the path we take will lead us into a life of righteousness and blessing.

- Basilea Schlink reminds us that we are essentially seeking a ‘person’ and not really a ‘path.’ When we find Christ, we find the right path.

“In the darkest of nights cling to the assurance that God loves you, that he always has advice for you, a path that you can tread and a solution to your problem--and you will experience that which you believe. God never disappoints anyone who places his trust in him.”

Jesus alluded to this same point, when he proclaimed: *I am the Road, also the Truth, also the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me. John 14:6* (The Message)

Why David includes the phrase ‘for his name’s sake’ is not 100% certain, but could have something to do with honouring the very name of God. In other words, God would not do anything that is contrary to his nature, name and character. God is always dependable!

God keeps his word! His word was his bond!

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Psalm 23:4*

Many of us modern travellers know little of the fear of walking along roads that wind their way through valleys and that are covered in darkness. The ancient routes that David had in mind provided the ideal hide out for criminals and highway robbers.

We have taken this phrase *the valley of the shadow of death* to refer mainly to our physical deaths, but another connection we can make is that 'death' also refers to the destruction of our souls. David is confident that even when our journey takes this path, God will be with us.

There are two items that every shepherd carries with them at all times and these will protect the vulnerable sheep on their journey. The rod was a short club, which was used to drive away wild animals or to deter thieves on the roads. The staff was a longer stick used to offer support for the shepherd, almost like a walking stick – picture Gandalf the Grey (And could be used to guide the shepherd who were wanting to be a little wayward).

Today's reading reminds us of the story of the two men walking with Jesus on the road to Emmaus – Luke 24. Jesus was with them in their grief and difficult times and he will also be with us during these dark moments.

*As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them. Luke 24:13-15*

☐ The Table (use as an illustration)

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.- Psalm 23:5*

Biblical scholar A.A. Anderson writes that there are two clear word pictures of God found in Psalm 23. The most obvious picture is that of a shepherd, but the other is of a gracious host.

Perfect Host – all is perfect.

God is the generous host, who in understanding the suffering of David, invites him to dine at the table laden with delicious food. I think most of us understand this part of the verse, but the reference to preparing a table in the presence of our enemies leaves us scratching our heads.

It was Middle Eastern custom to offer a place of refuge and hospitality to anyone on the road. So picture this – you are walking through the valley of shadows and are chased by some crooks – you run to the nearest tent and seek shelter. That family would shelter you and not just while the bad guys carried on their way. They would play host – make a special meal for you (while your enemies wait outside)

One explanation is that it was very likely that the people pursuing David were resident in the Temple or were regular worshippers with him. At the very least David knew who they were. God promises David that he is now going to honour him in the presence of those who were opposing him.

In the dramatic picture from the New Testament we remember how Jesus invited all of his disciples to share in the Passover meal with him – even though he knew Judas was ready to

betray him. *When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, truly I tell you, one of you will betray me. Matthew 26:20-21*

Statement: God invites all people to share in his heavenly banquet, but not everyone chooses to take up the invitation. Have you said 'Yes' to God's invitation?

*My cup overflows - You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.- Psalm 23:5*

In Hebrew folklore it is assumed that there are three things required for the perfect life – a table full of food, a head of hair rubbed with luxurious oil, and a cup overflowing with good wine.

In David's time it was always customary to anoint the head of guest with luxurious oils. This made the guests feel pampered and made sense if the person had travelled a long distance to get to the home.

The picture of a cup overflowing can be seen as the host being a little clumsy or even distracted, but it is meant to convey the complete opposite. God is being portrayed as being so gracious that he is not just giving the guests the bare minimum, but rather an abundance of his love and mercy. We are reminded today of God's great generosity in giving the very best for us.

*He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. Titus 3:5-7*

- Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Psalm 23:6*

Last year I was travelling over Boyes drive – from Kalk Bay to Muizenburg side and I watching a fishing boat chug out of the Kalk Bay harbour and head out into False Bay. The morning was crisp, with hardly any wind and consequently the ocean was smooth. What struck me was how the boat left a perfect wake as it chugged out to sea. The neat 'V' shape (although upside down) followed the boat for miles, with two distinct lines forming together at the back of the boat.

Could this be a picture of what the psalmist means when he says that goodness and mercy (love) will follow us all the days of our lives? As we walk in the paths of God, trusting in his directions, we will be blessed by the overflow of God's mercy and goodness?

Jesus left a trail of mercy and compassion in his wake. You could tell where Jesus had been because people had been healed by his compassionate hand and they had encountered mercy not seen in religious circles for generations.

- Jesus fulfilled the words of prophecy: For I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose. Exodus 33:19*

Is your life leaving a wake at the moment? What two things would people be seeing in your life?

Closing Story - ALL I NEED TO KNOW

A Sunday school teacher gave his class an assignment to learn the 23rd Psalm by next Sunday, because each was going to recite it to the whole church. A little boy named Bobby, just couldn't get it all in his head, he struggled all week long.

Finally Sunday comes and the church is packed out, standing room only, and suddenly it's Bobby's turn to say the Psalm. His teacher whispered, "O.K. Bobby it's your turn!"

Bobby is shaking like a leaf and sweating bullets, and then Bobby shouts, "The Lord is my Shepherd...and that's all I need to know!" - From a sermon by Dave Kinney

Prayer: Closing thoughts

Pray for someone else – think of them at this time – hold them in your prayers.

