

## "THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM"

### INTRODUCTION

Contrary to what a great many people rather automatically assume, the really great sentences in the Bible are not in the imperative mood. They are in the indicative. And to say that is in no way to slight the great "Thou shalt's" and the great "Thou shalt not's", the Ten Commandments and all the other ringing, ethical imperatives of the Scriptures. Stunning and stirring, they're like trumpet blasts for the soul. But the greatest sentences are in the indicative mood. Consider a few of them:

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life".

"God is love and He who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in Him". "Blessed are the peacemakers..."

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

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

### DEVELOPMENT

Not surprisingly, they are all about God and His never ceasing love for us. Yes, God loves you. And if God's love for us is the first and the greatest thing that we can say about Biblical faith, then the primary religious emotion is one of gratitude and not duty. Duty calls when gratitude fails to stir and prompt one to action. The great imperatives have to take second place. They're the signposts of the faith. The indicatives take first place; they're the hitching posts and as we prepare to start another season in our lives, it's well for us to get hitched up in the right way.

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."

How many times we've said it, or sung it. Do we really believe it? Albert Camus once said:

"For rich people, the sky is just an extra, a gift of nature. The poor, on the other hand, can see it as it really is: an infinite grace."

A green pasture. I think right away of that beautiful green golf course in Maine that I played six or seven times while away from the city. Forgetting the scores and those occasional shots that ended in the woods or the traps, what a blessing it was to see that green. A green pasture is not only a Summer meadow, it is any one of God's infinite graces.

For us urban folks, it is more likely to be a view of the river, or an evening at the opera, or a bike ride through Central park on a quiet Summer weekend. Maybe our jobs...certainly the food we eat...hopefully, our husbands, wives, our children, our friends. Perhaps the memories of days past, or our loved ones in the world beyond - anything or everything that nourishes us - all are an infinite grace. The suffering of the innocent, terrible and awesome as that mystery is, is as nothing compared to the mystery of undeserved good. And so we say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures".

It's too bad that we reserve grace for meals alone. How about saying just before opening a great novel, or before a concert - yes, even before a Red Sox - Yankee series - "For what we are about to receive, Lord, make us truly thankful".

LET'S GO ON But let's go on. Psalm 23 is dominated by the metaphor of God as a shepherd. Let me ask you where in relationship to the sheep do you usually picture the shepherd? Unless I'm mistaken, your answer will be "why...behind, of course". This is where shepherds are generally depicted in Western paintings. But listen again:

"The Lord is my shepherd. He leadeth me beside the still waters....He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His namesake."

Maybe it's significant that Eastern shepherds lead where their Western counterparts drive. In any case, God, as we see Him breaking through in the person of Christ, leads more than He drives. Remember how Jesus said: "Follow me" and always, everywhere, He goes first. "I go to prepare a place for you". It's a beautiful thought, isn't it? But let's not drift into sentimentality: that's what makes faith so difficult. It's easier to have someone tell you what you want and drive you toward it. It's a lot harder to be in the Church than in the army. Think about it. The power of love draws rather than drives.

I think of this in terms of our discipleship, and our commitment to Him. If it's real, we shouldn't have to be asked or driven. "Nothing is too much for me to do for My Lord" said someone to me in terms of a task in the Church.

"He leadeth me beside the still waters...He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness". If green pastures refer to everything that nourishes us, perhaps then the paths of righteousness are those that lead around prickly bushes and perilous pitfalls to our greater humanity. Isn't Christ always trying to make human beings more human?

BUT DO WE WANT TO FOLLOW But do we really want to follow? In our cities, the poor, God knows, live in physical ghettos. But God also knows that the rest of us usually live in psychological, philosophical and moral ghettos. And where the poor can't break out, so many times we don't want to.

Most of us want to get educated - which means quite literally "led forth" - but only in order to get the degree and then sink back into the little we've managed to learn.

We don't want to know better, deeper and more, to keep thinking all the time. We don't want to feel more deeply, more tenderly. It's more comfortable not to - even though it's ten times as boring. So we stay in our ghettos seeking not so much physical comfort as the psychological comfort founded on continued insensitivity. That's why the great pathfinders, like Christ himself, seek to lead us out and so often find themselves alone. Remember Galileo, or the pioneer painter, Manet? They told the public of new things they had discovered, not the time-worn things the public already knew and wanted to hear again. So the public was offended.

And the public was offended in mid-July by another independent spirit. Let us agree that the political trials in Russia are morally revolting. Let us also grant that Andrew Young should have said "economic" rather than political

prisoners when referring to the hundreds of American poor who are in jail today more because they are poor rather than because they are bad. But he said so little in reminding us that we should not seek to justify ourselves by relying on others' crimes. He said so little, but "oh" - how some screamed, those out of touch with any moral landscape, those who for decades have been using communist dirt to make soap to wash clean their own hands.

When ghettoized souls see someone who has broken out - their instinct is not to emulate him, but to take his freedom from him. So Christ is crucified. Galileo is persecuted. Manet's paintings are not hung. Andrew Young is called on to recant, if not resign.

#### WHAT THE PSALMIST HAD IN MIND

Perhaps now we can better see what the psalmist had in mind when after "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness" he wrote, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death". Instead of a natural death maybe...maybe he was thinking of freedom's price.

But let's continue that line. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil". We are back again to the beginning, to the great indicatives: "God is our refuge and our strength - a very present help in trouble".

Note the beautiful device the psalmist now uses to underscore his certitude of God's never ceasing love. Up to now God, the shepherd, has been referred to in the third person singular. "The Lord is my shepherd. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness.." But watch the change when the psalmist refers to life's most devastating moments. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow, I will fear no evil - for thou art with me!"

How beautiful is that little switch from the third person singular to the second person! And he goes on with the second person. "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."

Do you know what's going on here? The reference here is to a desert law of hospitality. Were I fleeing my enemies and came to your campsite, you would be obliged to take me in for two nights and the day intervening while my enemies remained outside the circle of light cast by your campfire.

The Psalmist ends by contrasting this limited law of hospitality of the desert with the hospitality we can expect from a loving God: "Surely...goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life...(as well as enemies) and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord".....not for two nights and a day in between, but "forever". "Forever"...!"Forever."

#### CLOSING

Let me end on a personal note. With each passing year this psalm gains meaning in my own life. Life here in the city doesn't get easier for any of us. As human misery deepens and violence rises, we are going to have to gain in decency and lucidity and in daring as Christians. We are going to have to move out of our spiritual ghettos, as Christians, on to the high paths of righteousness, in the footsteps of Jesus, our Lord. And all this will be quite possible because of the great indicatives of the Bible, the

hitching posts that provide us with hope. Think of them.

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Yea...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil."

For, with St. Paul:

"I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That's an indicative. A Hitching post for our lives. As that bumper sticker put it that I saw yesterday on the road:

"God said it. I believe it. That settles it"

LET US PRAY

ANNOUNCEMENTS: February 10, 1980

GREETING We greet the visitors in the congregation this morning. We hope that the opportunity will be ours to greet you personally before you depart - either at the door or downstairs in the Russell Room where today, an all-church brunch will be held.

Be free in the sharing of your name. Sign one of our Guest Books, and join us on other Sundays in worship and in fellowship. You worship in a Church that has been ministering to the needs of people in this city in the name of Jesus Christ since 1837. It is in His name that we bid you welcome this hour.

We like to say "there are no strangers here...only friends who have not yet met". Welcome.

CONCERNS Be sure to pick up a copy of the February issue of "A Word In Edgeways". Copies are available in the narthex and also downstairs in the Russell Room.

An all-church brunch will be served today at 12:30. Tickets may be purchased at the door. I believe they cost one dollar. We're set up for one hundred people and anticipate a good response. Following the brunch there will be a meeting of the United Methodist Women. Voting on the allocation of funds made in November is one of the important items on the agenda.

Note that there will be a program planning meeting on Tuesday evening of the Adult Fellowship.

Today, all of Methodism across the country is receiving a special offering in connection with the Human Relations Day emphasis. The need is great and the cause is good. I hope that as a church we shall respond with a two hundred dollar gift. Envelopes are in the pews. Part of that which is received nationally comes back into our own city. The Chinese congregation in lower Manhattan is on the receiving end of gifts made. I hope that you will "keep caring and keep sharing".

TODAYS' PREACHER We welcome Dr. Paul Mickey to our pulpit this morning. A Seminary Professor and leader of the Good News Movement in the United Methodist Church, Dr. Mickey is a personal friend of our Lay Leader, William Proctor and it is through efforts that we were able to line him up to be with us. I have asked Brother Proctor if he would introduce Paul Mickey to you.

LOOKING AHEAD Remember that Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, February 20th. Also, that our Charge Conference is two weeks from today. The Charge Conference always charges us up for another year of service, and we anticipate a good turn out for the meeting. Two weeks from today.

OFFERING Jesus said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.