

"THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist
Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 9, 1983

INTRODUCTION It's good to have these young people in here with us this morning...to share in their confirmation and reception into the Church...and I'd like to ask them to open their Bibles to page 476, to Psalm 23, that beautiful Psalm that Nikolaus Kashey read earlier in the service. If you take your Bible and open it to the middle, you'll just about "hit" the Book of Psalms.

You can't preach only once on the 23rd Psalm, as I did about three years ago, and not return to it. As finally there is only one hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" - so finally, there is only one Psalm - the 23rd.

Have you located page 476? All right then, let's get started and follow along as we think about this great psalm of David. Some of the adults present will be reading it from where it has long been written - in the soft places of their hearts.

DEVELOPMENT Let me say what I said the last time I preached on this psalm. The greatest statements in the Bible are not the Commandments, those great "Thou Shalt Nots" - nor even the great "Thou Shalts". Stirring and stunning as they are, the commandments are not the great thing. The greatest statements in the Bible are in the indicative, not in the imperative. You know your English grammar to know the difference, so we won't go into that.

It is not what God tells us to do, but what God has already done for us that is the basis of the Christian faith. So the most important statements are such as these:

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

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in Him."

"Even though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not love, I am a noisy gong and a clashing cymbal."

And from the Old Testament:

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46)

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

SHEPHERD CARRYING A SHEEP I spent some time yesterday looking through our Sunday School visual aids file to see if I could find a picture of a shepherd carrying a sheep. Specifically I was looking for a shepherd who is Christ and I found one. It's done in needle point and it's beautiful. It shows Jesus, the Good Shepherd, carrying a small lamb, just the way a mother carries a small child. This needlepoint visual aid of Jesus, the Good Shepherd was done by a former member of our Church, Isabel Tomlinson, and given to our Sunday School.

Let me ask you this: what does a mother say to a child as she rocks the child in her arm? She says,

"Little child...you're all right...you're going to make it.
I'm going to protect you from the terrors of the day and
from the darkness of the night."

The child is being confirmed. We become who we are because we are loved. We are loved into being and that's what Jesus, the Good Shepherd, does for us. The Good Shepherd says you are "certified", stamped as it were...not made in the USA, or Ghana, or the Philippines or wherever - but made in the mind and the heart of God. And nurtured in the arms of the Shepherd.

GOD CARES There is nothing more important than understanding that God cares, that He really cares. This is the theme that runs throughout the entire 23rd Psalm. Of course, when we grow up, like so many sheep, we can go astray, and wander off. That sort of thing can happen even when you're in school, sixth grade, seventh grade...when you're a teenager. You can get lost and lose your way. Over in the New Testament, on page 908, in the 15th chapter of Luke's Gospel, we read about that happening...one sheep out of one hundred gets lost. And then what does the shepherd do? He abandons 99 sheep to get the one sheep that is lost.

Actually, boys and girls and everyone, if you want to read a really moving chapter, read the three stories in the 15th chapter of Luke's Gospel, pages 908 and 909. It starts with a lost sheep. It goes on to the story of a lost coin. It ends up with a story of a lost person, the Prodigal Son. But that story is not really about a lost person; it's about a bereaved father, who can't keep his son at home, but when his son goes astray, he stands on the road day after day - yearning...longing...hoping...looking.

But more than that, in the New Testament, God - the Father - goes down the road to meet the son - a son for a son, a Savior to save. God cares. That's the most important thing we can possibly say. So, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures". Green is generally considered the most comforting color. "He leadeth me beside the still waters."

But now, before we go on, reflect on this thought.

HE LEADS THE SHEEP We don't see many sheep around New York City, and not many shepherds. But let's pretend that right over here in Central Park in that section called The Sheep Meadow that there's a herd of sheep. And let's picture a couple of sheep dogs, probably running around keeping all the sheep in line. And picture the shepherd with his big staff, behind the herd, sort of trying to keep them in line and together.

That's how we would probably picture it...but actually, we'd be wrong...having the shepherd behind the sheep. The pictures I've seen of shepherds from Biblical times always showed them in front of the sheep, leading them. "He leadeth me beside the still waters....He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness."

It reminds me that love draws, that love calls us, that love is ahead of us. Western shepherds may drive their sheep, but Eastern shepherds lead them. And

that big staff is not to nudge the sheep, but rather it's there to beat off the wolves. Love leads us. It draws us, calls us, God is always ahead of us. A pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. God is ahead of us as much as above us, or in us.

LOVE INDIVIDUALIZES I'll tell you something else about Eastern shepherds. A friend tells this story of how he once visited an Eastern land where there were sheep and shepherds. He asked a shepherd how many sheep in his herd and he said he didn't know...that he couldn't count. And my friend said, "How do you know you haven't lost a sheep?" Back came the reply, "Oh, I know them all by name...."

In other words, love individualizes. In Isaiah 43 one reads:

"But now thus says the Lord, He who created you, O Jacob, He formed you, O Israel. Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine!" (Bubu, Nana, Craig, James, Christinn)

That's what the shepherds do. They lead us and know each one of us by name.

Now let's take a look at where He leads us. We read that "he leads us beside the still waters"...where he restores our souls, and that "he leads us in the paths of righteousness" and not for our sake, but for "His name's sake." He leads us in two places - "By the still waters" for rest, and "in paths of righteousness" for labor.

As I look around this congregation and recognize some of the workaholics among you, I wonder....do you ever let the Good Shepherd occasionally lead you beside still waters. It is presumptuous to think that everything in the world should work out well without our having to walk occasionally by "still waters",

HISTORY Boys and girls, the book you're holding in your hands is not mostly poetry, like this 23rd Psalm. It is mostly history. And in English the word comes out rather well - "His story" - because God is the main character in the book we call the Bible.

And as you grow older, I hope you'll read and study more and more history. At times we adults tend to think that history began yesterday; we forget what the Bible teaches: that we, for instance, do not break the Ten Commandments as we are broken on them. We are not punished for our sins so much as we are punished by them. Life is consequential; it's for real. And life swings on an ethical hinge. If you loosen that hinge, history will swing in to some dark rooms and lead us into some dark corners.

"He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness". Thus says the Lord,

"Stand by the road and look and ask for the ancient path, and where the good way is, and walk in it, and find rest for your soul".

That's a beautiful line combining rest and righteousness.

ON TO THE END Back to the Psalm and on to the end. Here's one of my favorite parts, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of

the shadow of death, I will fear no evil". There's one of the great sentences in the indicative. Notice the way the psalmist is underscoring the sure presence of God at one of life's most difficult moments. 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 now as the psalmist refers to life's most devastating moments, he says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." The third person changes to the second person singular, a statement to a prayer. And the prayer continues, "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over."

And something else has changed. God is no longer the shepherd, and we the sheep. God is now the host and we are the guests. What's being referred to here is the Desert Law of Hospitality. Were I fleeing my enemies and I came to you for refuge, according to the Desert Law of Hospitality, you would have to accept me for two nights and the day intervening. And my enemies would have to stay outside the circle of light cast by the fire.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over."

You see the Psalmist ends by contrasting this limited hospitality with the hospitality that we can expect from God. "Surely goodness and mercy..." and if you want - in your imagination for those sheep in Central Park's Sheep Meadow to have two sheep dogs...then let's call them "Goodness and Mercy". Because Goodness and Mercy shall "follow me all the day of my life"...and "I shall dwell in the House of the Lord, forever" - not just for two nights and the day in between, but forever.

PRAYER

O Thou who art the Great and Good Shepherd, be near to each of us - to lead us, to guide us, to confirm us, and to strengthen us in all we do in the week before us.

If we are called upon to walk through dark valleys, make Yourself known to us even there. Help us always to walk in paths of righteousness.

All of this in the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen

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I spent some time yesterday looking through our Sunday School visual aids to see if I could find a picture of a shepherd carrying a sheep. Specifically I was looking for a shepherd who is Christ. I was looking for a picture of a black shepherd, because Christ is black, white, yellow, red. I was looking for a picture of Jesus carrying a small lamb, just the way a mother carries a small child. I didn't find the picture I was looking for. I guess it's been misplaced. ~~It would have been helpful to have that visual aid in opening this psalm up to you. So we won't have the help of a visual aid.~~

But let me ask you this:

What does a mother say to a child as she rocks the child in her arm? She says, "Little child...you're all right, you're going to make it, I'm going to protect you from the terrors of the day and the darkness of the night".

The child is being confirmed. We become who we are because we are loved. We are loved into being and that's what Jesus the Good Shepherd does for us. The Good Shepherd says you are certified, stamped as it were, not made in the USA, Korea, or Japan - but made in the mind of God. And nurtured in the arms of the Shepherd.

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Let's move on to another thought.

LOVE INDIVIDUALIZES I'll tell you something else about Eastern shepherds. A friend of mine went to India once and ran into a shepherd. He said to him, have you gone to school? The shepherd said "no". "Can you count?" again, "no". "How do you know you haven't lost a sheep?" "Oh...I know them all by name"

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CLOSING Now...why don't we end this little homily by all of us joining together in singing the 23rd Psalm. And this morning let me introduce you to a hymn for the psalm that's not in our hymn book. Let's sing it to that beautiful tune called "Crimond"...it comes from Scotland...and those of you who have roots in England or Wales or Scotland probably grew up singing this melody.

It's a haunting melody....it needs to be sung at a slower place than we normally sing our hymns...sung with great feeling. Second tune on the sheet in your bulletin insert...2nd tune of 104.

Let's sing it with great strength and feeling...like I remember hearing the people of London and Edinburgh sing it in their churches. Let it all out, nad have a good sing together. Before we do, let us share in prayer.

PRAYER O Thou who art the great shepherd, be near to us...to lead us, to guide us, to confirm us, to strengthen us in all we do in the week ahead. And if we are called upon to walk through dark valleys, make yourself know to us even there. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Help us to walk in paths of righteousness...

Lord, we thank you for these young people...scouts...and members of our church's youth fellowship...for those who work with them quietly, patiently...with love and joy. May they all know of your love in their generation and may the world one day know of their love in the next generation.