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“From City Streets to Still Waters--OR--Finding Security in Steadfast Love”

Psalm 23

Read the psalm online: NSRV, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=203089945>

King James, <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2023&version=KJV>

This Psalm washes over us like a hot bath over our aching muscles at the end of a long day. The words of this text, especially in the older, more familiar language of the King James translation are an elixir of sorts that calms our anxieties, cools our anger, sets us at ease. All we need to hear are the words “The Lord is my shepherd” and our breathing deepens, our pulse slows, and we settle down. The words of this Psalm, by the power of God’s Spirit, offer us comfort and give us courage when life somehow seems unbearable and we’re not sure how to go on. Maybe that’s why we hear this Psalm most often read during funeral liturgies, when we need words that assure us that even when nothing is right, God is with us still.

The psalm opens with a pastoral setting: a sheep at rest in green pastures, near still waters. But as we read on, we see that an encounter with the Divine Shepherd isn’t limited to a scene of serenity. Despite being led by the Good Shepherd to a place of restoration and righteousness, the Psalmist still winds up in the valley of the shadow of death, in the presence of enemies. The idyllic setting of the opening verses quickly gives way to the realities of worldly living. It seems that the Psalmist knows in his day what we, too, have come to know well: that we will inevitably encounter situations or people that might lead us into harm’s way. Some folks will view us as a competitor; others in this world simply won’t accept us – and might even go so far as to hate us – just because of our gender or race or our religion or sexual identity. And while it is true that there are glimpses of paradise on earth, the Psalmist is well aware that looming threats are real, too. Wolves and bandits of ancient Israel are today’s bankruptcy and cancer, abuse and divorce. This Psalm holds it all together, somehow; the reality that this beautiful life is also full of experiences that challenge and may even threaten our existence.

So why does this psalm comfort us so much? Why is this one of the only Psalms we can recite from beginning to end? Why is this a passage we carry in our hearts and our memories? I think it is because this Psalm, at its heart, is all about the power of God’s love. Within the imagery of a Shepherd leading his sheep, the Psalmist is claiming that God’s love is so strong, so powerful, so vibrant and true that the trials we encounter pale in comparison to the truth of God’s loving hold on us.

Hebrew Lesson One: A quick look at most English translations of this text do not include the word love at all. Yet the word that follows “goodness” in verse is the Hebrew word *chesed* (חסד). This word has a range of interpretations because it is a big word in the Hebrew language. It is a word that describes grace and compassion,



not just felt but enacted. It is a word that describes a quality of faithfulness, of one who does not give up on another, even when there is good cause to do so. It is a word that describes the quality of love that God has for God's people; an abiding love, a love that will not let us go. Chesed is steadfast love; a relentless, tireless, full love; the love of God for God's people.

So even with the striking imagery of still waters and dark valleys, God's chesed is the real setting of this psalm. The dwelling place of the Psalmist is within God's loving grasp. God's love is tangibly present in moments of rest and moments of trial; in times of safety and times of danger. God is lovingly present through it all.

Like the Psalmist, our lives play out within the context of God's steadfast love. This love is so powerful, so authentic, so pure that it impacts the very context of our daily lives, whether we feel it or not, whether we run toward this truth or try to run and hide from its hold. God's steadfast love is more than a beautiful emotion. It is a love that makes a difference. Within the context of God's love there is a security we can not only feel but trust, whether we are receiving the provision of food, water, rest, protection, and direction of the Good Shepherd, or whether we are more aware of the looming dangers along the path of our journey. God's love holds us, so that we know we are not ever alone. And in God's grasp, no external danger will have a final say.

When I was a little girl, our neighborhood had a fire whistle, a siren that would sound throughout our borough. It called the volunteer fire department to action in the event of an emergency. This sound scared me as a little girl, at first just by the sheer tone of its noise. As I grew older my imagination would fill in what I didn't know, and I would be afraid for some anonymous family in my neighborhood who I thought was in danger somewhere. Yet I also remember as a child that whenever the fire whistle would sound at night, my parents would appear by our bedsides before our eyes had shot open in fear. And somehow this made all the difference. They couldn't stop the loud cry of the siren, nor could they do anything about the crisis to which this siren pointed. But their presence gave us courage. We knew that with them we were safe.

Mr. Rogers says: "It always helps to have people we love beside us when we have to do difficult things in life."¹ By the grace of God, many of us know what it feels like to be held in another's love; to know that with their love in our life we are never alone, that we are more secure. We know that it helps when a parent comes into the doctor's office when we have to get a shot; or our partner or spouse sits by our stretcher as we await surgery. Their presence doesn't take away the sting of the injection or the risks of surgery that we read on our waivers, but somehow it is easier to face these fears when we are not alone, when we are loved. We know that a loving presence is important, that it matters somehow. It helps when a friend comes to our doctoral defense, helps us pack to move, or drives us to a job interview. Having loved ones

¹ Rogers, Fred. The World According to Mr. Rogers: Important Things to Remember. P 57.



near does make hard stuff easier, and can even make trials, somehow, sacred. We intuit this somehow, which is why we visit people in hospitals or attend funerals. Not because our presence can change the reality of a diagnosis or departure, but because the gift of our love and our presence makes a difference.

God's love makes a difference too. God's presence makes a difference. Recognizing that God is the initiator, the poet writes: God's love satisfies, so there is nothing for which we lack. God's love shifts our focus away from the consumerist desires of this world and toward a deeper truth. God's love commands our rest and restoration, so that we might experience the wholeness God desires for us, and participate in the wholeness God calls us to offer for others.² God's love leads us to that which nurtures us physically and spiritually. God's love leads us to that which is right and just. God's love makes God's presence known. Even when danger lurks, when we are vulnerable, insecure, at risk—we know are not alone. God, in love, protects us and leads us through. God offers abundant life even when we are with those who seek to take what we have. And when we fail to follow God's lead, God's love follows us all of our days, as our shelter, our home.

The reality of God's present, steadfast love is a transforming truth at the heart of our faith. Thomas Merton says, *The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but the faith that one is loved. The faith that one is loved by God.*³ God's present love does not ensure that life is always easy or even safe. But God's love assures us that we are never alone, never abandoned to the devices of others, never left forgotten in this world. This reality impacts the context of our experiences. It affirms the truth of our own worth, it comforts us in our fear and gives us courage to face that which lies ahead.

Anne Lamott tells the story of her son, Sam (age 10), growing accustomed to his new room in their new house that was two rooms and two short hallways away. Scared, each night, he would end up in her room, curled up with his own blanket on her bed. She writes:

I tried the obvious ways of helping him get his confidence back – a night light, bribes, Power Ranger sheets. Nothing worked. Finally Sam and I came up with a solution: The first night, he put his sleeping bag and pillow right beside my bed, where our old dog, Sadie, could peer out at him tenderly. The second night we moved the sleeping bag three feet away, to the foot of my bed. The next night, he moved three more feet away. On the fourth night, he made it to the door. He slept there two nights before he was able to put his sleeping bag in the hall. I kept the door open... The short hallway to the living room took three nights to master. Then there were four nights in the living room, as he crept overland closer to his own room, with four three-foot scootches, one stall, and one night when he had to drag his sleeping bag back three feet. Sometimes he would call out, "Good night" again to here my voice. A few times he called for me to come sit with him. My nearness lifted him.

² Shappiro, Rabbi Rami. *Spirituality and Health*. "The Path of Love." January/February 2012. P53.

³ Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. P 75.



*Sometimes grace works like water wings when you feel you are sinking.*⁴

The Psalm for today is a psalm of grace that lifts us when we are sinking. The words are God's promise that we are never alone, not even when the darkness hides us and we can't see God looking over at us from our corner of the world. This Psalm affirms God's promise to be with us, always; even in places that are difficult or dangerous, or unlikely settings for banquet feasts. The words assure us of a powerful love that reaches out to us, that invites us, that holds us, that hems us in. With God's steadfast love and faithful presence as the foundation of our lives, we are freed "to be a liberating blessing for the world."⁵

The journey of faith, the journey of life, may not be easy, but it is a journey marked by the persistent, powerful love of God. God's love pursues us, chasing after us when we deny it or turn away.⁶ But as an old teacher once said: Truth is truth. We are loved. This knowledge is essential. It can form how we view ourselves: our worth, our sense of purpose, our understanding of relationship. But this reality is not only a foundation for comfort and encouragement to us in dark times and scary places. It is a truth that, if accepted, shapes how we view our world. From the arms of God's love, we are open to the possibility of seeing the world through a lens of abundance and gratitude and mercy and love. The power of God's love, received, gives us the strength and the opportunity to be a people of love: to invest in community, to care for our neighbor, to honor creation, to take the risks necessary to participate in God's mission of justice and peace and fullness of life for all.

God's love is strong, so strong that God's love became incarnate, put on flesh and bone, and dwelled among us in Jesus Christ. In Christ, the fullness of God's love dwells, a love that teaches us compassion and justice; a love that leads us, too; a love that risked everything so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. He's calling.

Thanks be to God.

⁴ Lamott, Anne. *Grace (Eventually)*. P 49-50.

⁵ Shappiro, Rabbi Rami. P 52.

⁶ Brueggeman, Walter. *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggeman*. P 114-115.

