

TROUBLED HEARTS
When We're Lost and Weary (Psalm 23)
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/when-were-weary-and-lost/

2020 what a year. I heard someone recently say people need to stop saying 2020 can't get any worse because apparently 2020 is taking that as a challenge. Each month seems to bring some unimaginable heartbreak or next level worse situation. "Who had murder hornets on their card for June?" "Who had Greek alphabet hurricanes on their card for September?" "Who had a presidential election on their card for November?" Oh, wait ...

In April and May, during those first isolating and overwhelming days of COVID-19, twice a day my mom would send my sister and I funny memes or photos from the internet about life during COVID. She called them morning laughs and evening laughs, and we needed every single laugh because everyday life was heavy and full of uncertainty and fear.

But there are some moments when you simply can't laugh. Or you start with laughter but soon find yourself crying as the laughter opens the gates to all the emotions you've been avoiding, and at the first unguarded opportunity, they come pouring out.

For many of us, our hearts are troubled. Deeply troubled. Many of us are weary and exhausted, troubled by all the things around us and within us. How do we continue to be people of hope when things feel hopeless?

In this three-week sermon series, *Troubled Hearts*, beginning today we're going to talk about God's presence and provision in times of fatigue, fear, and fragility. And let's be honest today with one another and with God. Many of us are fatigued. We're afraid. We're fragile. There is no sin or shame in feeling these emotions in response to all the heavy things going on around us and within us.

And yet there is an invitation, from the One who loves us, to a life not at the mercy of emotions; a compassionate invitation to set our feelings and our fears down and pick up hope instead. And to do that as often as needed. One expression of this invitation is Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 is the most well-known Psalm or song from the Bible. It is quoted often at funerals as it was this week at Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's and many people have it hanging in their homes on some lacquered plaque or cross-stitched display.

It is a beautiful psalm about what it means to live a life focused on a good God who loves us and provides for all we need. God is the focus of the psalm as God is mentioned 10 times in 6 verses. Author and Professor Dallas Willard began and ended most everyday meditating on the 23rd Psalm. He said, "When you pray Psalm 23 you find that Someone is there waiting for you

to greet you and guide you.” So, let’s read this Psalm together today and meet the One waiting to greet us and guide us.

*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.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name’s sake.
 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil;
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff—
 they comfort me.
 You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
 my whole life long.*

The major claim of Psalm 23 is this: God, who is the Shepherd, provides for our lives so that we may live without any need and without any fear. A life without any need or any fear? Even in 2020? It sounds like a campaign slogan – too good to be true. So, let’s walk through this brief but powerful psalm together to find out, if indeed, God is inviting our lost and weary selves to a life without need or fear, and if so, how we live such a life.

The Lord is my shepherd,

The first words out of the gate are a reminder about who is God and who is not. Knowing my own tendency to take the wheel, how fitting that we’re reminded first thing about who really is in control. A sheep doesn’t worry about where to find green pastures or a stream from which to drink. A sheep trusts the shepherd to lead them and provide for them. A sheep doesn’t whip out Google Maps and show the shepherd a different route to a greener pasture. A sheep has complete faith the shepherd knows what he or she is doing. They are dependent. Now, if you don’t trust that God is good and believe you are safe in God’s hands, then this might cause some anxiety. But if we can learn to trust that God is who God says God is and will do what God says God will do, the idea you are in the care of Someone like that can be liberating.

I shall not want

The phrase “I shall not want” is literally rendered from Hebrew “nothing do I lack”. The author reminds us that God provides exactly what we need so that we lack nothing. For those of us

who feel guilty when we pray the phrase “I shall not want” knowing full well we most certainly want, this understanding of the phrase is important. For it has nothing to do with our desire for things. It has everything to do with the truth that God will provide what we need. I don’t have to will myself to not want. Instead, I learn to rest in the truth that God provides all I really need, so I shall not want. I can’t want. God provides. Again, how liberating that this psalm stays focused on who God is and what God does even when we think it is about what we must do.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters;

When would a sheep be lying down in a green pasture or be standing by still waters? Only when that sheep is no longer hungry and no longer thirsty. Otherwise, the sheep would be standing and eating or disturbing the water getting a drink. Under the Shepherd’s care, our needs are met, and more is always available, so we can lay down and rest, content with God provision now and tomorrow and the day after that.

He restores my soul.

Sheep are fascinating creatures. But did you know: if a sheep that is heavily pregnant, overweight, or has a heavy fleece, gets on its back, they can’t get themselves back up without help. Yes, I know ... some of us can relate.

There is a term for this kind of sheep. **It is a cast sheep** – a sheep that has tipped over and cannot get back up. They can become distressed and die within a short period of time if they are not rolled back into a normal position. When back on their feet, they may need support for a few minutes to ensure they are steady. The shepherd watches for this, and when he sees a sheep on its back, will gently pick them up, hold them until they calm down, and set them right.

This is what the Hebrew word for “restores” means in Psalm 23 – the act of the Shepherd setting the sheep back up. God is continually restoring us – setting us back upright after we have fallen or been knocked over by hard things in life. He holds us tenderly, comforting us until we’re steady again and ready to walk. What a beautiful image to hold on to in those moments when we feel we are floundering and unable to gain our footing. God watches for this, and is quick to pick us up, calm us down, and set us right once more.

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.

When we’ve been restored, we tend to walk closely to God, following His lead as a natural response of being set right again. We feel safe. We feel loved. We feel grateful. The more closely we follow, the more we trust. Which leads us to say ...

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

Our confidence in this Good Shepherd who leads us into a life without lack, a life where he restores us - our confidence in Him outweighs the fears around us. The Shepherd has “the power to lead us – even through the dark valley of death – because he has been there, and he

knows his way out.”¹ We are not ignorant to the dangers of the world, but we don’t live in fear of them. Why?

For You are with me, God.

Dallas Willard writes, “The complete sufficiency of the life without lack is based upon the presence of God.”² Trusting God has not forsaken nor forgotten us is the key to a life without lack. There have been moments in my life where I’ve been overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, where hope seems lost and the worst thing you can imagine is now possible or actually happening. And after exhausting all efforts to figure a way out of it or around it on my own, I too become exhausted. And in that moment of brokenness, I always come back to one question, “Do I believe God is good?” And the answer is always, “Yes, I believe God is good and will never abandon me no matter how dark the valley.” Do I wish I would I trust that sooner rather than later? Absolutely. But I’m forever grateful that trust is there when I find myself on my back unable to set myself right and in need of a Shepherd.

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me

The Shepherd’s tools of strength and protective care are the rod and staff. They are used to draw sheep from danger or to fend off predators. God will protect us, and this brings us comfort and assurance. And with this comfort, we do not fear.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemy.

For a long time, when I read Psalm 23:5 about God preparing a table before me in the presence of my enemies, I always pictured this long, wooden table in a dark castle, overflowing with the best food and wine and me sitting at the head chair. And my enemies standing around the room, hungry, miserable and being forced to watch me eat. This image always made me a little uncomfortable but maybe that was how it was supposed to be. Talk about missing the point. Talk about what a self-focused, entitled spirit will do to you as you read scripture. The truth is this: since I am to love my enemies in the kingdom of God, I would not eat a delicious meal in their presence and let them stand there hungry. When you know the Good Shepherd directs your life, when you lack for nothing, when God restores you, when you live out of this truth, you are free to walk and eat with your enemies because there is abundance for all and you know it. You don’t have to hoard blessings because you know there is enough for all. And you’re at the table by grace, too.

You anoint my head with oil.

Attack by the blow fly is a real concern to a shepherd. It is a cause of weakness and death in affected animals. The fly lays its eggs on the sheep, and within twenty-four hours, the larvae penetrate the skin and multiply, and soon the sheep is poisoned. Thankfully, there is a treatment: backlining. An appropriate ointment is poured on the animal’s head and along its back to kill the disease. David, the author of this psalm who had also been a shepherd, knew

¹ Julie Pennington Russell, “Our Good Shepherd (Psalm 23)”, *This is What a Preacher Looks Like: Sermons by Baptist Women in Ministry*, Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2010, 89.

² Dallas Willard, *Life without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23*, Nashville: Willard Family Trust, 2018.

about treating disease in his flock. He would also have seen how larvae or maggots were like his own sin—leading to death. David needed the divine remedy; so, do we. God anoints/ pours out oil, protection over us to kill that which is life-taking rather than life-giving.

My cup runs over! (KEYDUSH)

In Jewish tradition, the command to “keep the Sabbath holy” is followed religiously, beginning at sundown Friday and lasting a full twenty-four hours, until sundown Saturday. Friday evening, to welcome the prescribed unplug, the family recites a blessing – the Kiddush. There’s a Kiddush cup and a saucer. I own this set from Israel.

When the blessing is recited, typically the father of the family pours wine into the goblet until it overflows, spilling out. The pouring out, the overflow, the blessing – the symbol here as the Sabbath begins is that God’s abundance cannot be contained, nor can our joy at celebrating the Sabbath.

In a Psalm 23 life, our cups aren’t full; they run over. I have more of God’s abundance than my cup will hold. So much that I can be as generous as my Shepherd without fear of ever running out. So much so that I am convinced:

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!

David, the author of the psalm, expresses his conviction of the guarantee of God’s blessing upon his daily, earthly life. He reminds us that God’s goodness and mercy is with us wherever we go—the doctor’s office, grocery store, a season of unemployment, a quiet Saturday with family, wherever. In the second half of verse six, David reminds us that even if the path we walk is so difficult that we lose our earthly lives, our eternal destination is safe and secure: “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Today, in the midst of an ever-present threat to our health, lost jobs, social isolation, a challenging economy, a divided nation, our weariness, God calls us all to trust God, the Good Shepherd. Even if we lose our jobs, our homes, our loved ones—even then, God will still be good and will still show us mercy because that is God’s character and God never changes. God’s provision may look like a friend sharing a bag of flour, the church and charitable organizations offering assistance, social interaction via Facetime or Zoom, a few friends gathered outside, a child who asks to cuddle, or the persistent care of doctors and nurses as you or someone you love struggles with health. No matter what form God’s provision takes, God promises to carry His own to the end, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Friends, we still have three months to go in 2020. I don’t know what else may come up on our individual and collective bingo cards. We may have seen the worst or the worst may still be yet to come.

What I do know is this: if you feel lost or weary, as I sometimes do, know there is a Shepherd who loves you and is with you; a Shepherd who will pick you back up, steady you, and set you right again; a Shepherd who will walk the dark valley with you; a Shepherd who will protect you and provide for you; a Shepherd who provides in abundance, a Shepherd who wants nothing more than to swing you up on his shoulders and carry you to a safe place of rest and peace.³ We are not forsaken. We are not alone. The Lord is our Shepherd. We live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God. The kingdom is not in trouble and neither are we.⁴

³ Russell, 89.

⁴ James Bryan Smith. <https://emilypfreeman.com/podcast/the-next-right-thing/86/> (with paraphrase)