

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Year A, RCL  
May 3, 2020  
North Fork Ministries

**Psalm 23**

1

*The LORD is my shepherd; \*  
I shall not be in want.*

2

*He makes me lie down in green pastures \*  
and leads me beside still waters.*

3

*He revives my soul \*  
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.*

4

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil; \*  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

5

*You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \*  
you have anointed my head with oil,  
and my cup is running over.*

6

*Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, \*  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

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The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm appears in the Lectionary as much or more often than any other piece of scripture. It is recited at every burial service and is probably imprinted in the memory of more of you than any other Old Testament scripture. Most of us who are older recall Psalm 23 in the language of the King James Version.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow  
of death,  
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;  
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

I don't often preach the Psalms, but this week I couldn't resist it. The Psalter is a collection of 150 songs and prayers, some written as long as 3000 years ago, powerful and poetic expressions of the full range of the fears and joys, the love and longing, the despair and the devotion of the people of Israel as they sought to understand and to come to terms with the nature of the mysterious YAHWEH. They were a nomadic people, trailing behind their sheep across often hostile territory, sometimes enslaved and scattered by fierce enemies, always subject to the vagaries of weather and wind, tribal disputes, rumor and superstition. The impact of drought and flood were immediately felt. Death, whether at the hand of a well-armed foe or revealed in the jaws of a fierce beast, was a constant companion.

If I had preached on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm a few months ago, I would have painted a picture of the contrast between the world of the Psalmist and the world in which we lived here on the North Fork. I would have compared the brutality of existence for the Israelites who composed and sang these psalms, with the

relative luxury of our way of life.

Most of us here live under a shingled roof, not a leaking tent. We have no reason to fear beasts prowling outside a tent flap. We are confident of our next meal. If we get sick, we usually have doctors and hospitals waiting for us. And while eventual death is as certain for us as it was for the Israelites, we are not haunted by the fearsome presence of famine and plague and pestilence that made life for early humankind, as Thomas Hobbs described it, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In contrast, it seems that we, with our safe homes and nice cars, fine food and long lives, had nothing to fear.

What could the psalms possibly have to say to us? Certainly the psalmist’s words resonated with those who lived the precarious existence of the shepherd, who longed for a god who would look after him with the same care as he tended his own sheep. The Israelites sought a god who would provide them and their flocks with green pastures and still waters, a god who would revive their troubled souls and guide them through the very real dangers that surrounded them.

In comparison with those ancient people whose daily walk took them through the valley of the shadow of death, what do we have to fear? Nothing, I thought

two months ago, and prepared to climb into a warm and secure bed.

Long ago I became rather well acquainted with most of the fearsome events that can transpire over the course of a life fully lived, and having emerged reasonably intact, I like to think of myself as relatively fearless. If I have a theme song, it's probably from the Willie Nelson song that goes like this:

*It's been rough and rocky traveling  
But I'm finally standing upright on the ground  
After taking several readings  
I'm surprised to find my mind's still fairly sound*

But then, a few months ago, we woke up to the world of the Novel Corona Virus. For some of us it took a while to sink in. We resisted the idea of “sheltering in place” or maintaining a proper social distance. At first it seemed comical to touch elbows rather than shake hands. And then we saw hospital beds fill with Covid 19 patients. And then most of us knew people who were infected. And then people started dying – people we knew. And so we stay home. And we learn computer skills we never needed before. And some of us are lonely. And we miss being with our friends and family. And we miss church. And, if we are willing to admit it, we are afraid. And suddenly, the idea of walking through the valley of the shadow

death, doesn't seem so far-fetched. And the idea of fearing no evil, because the Lord is with us, resonates in a way it may never have before.

We are rarely realistic in our fears. It is not unusual for a cigarette smoker (whose habit is very likely to kill him) to have a fear of flying in jetliners, really a very safe form of transportation. Or I might decide to ski a dangerous slope in Colorado, and then avoid food containing relatively harmless preservatives. We fear snakes, lizards and spiders, although Americans are very rarely killed by these creatures. We are more apprehensive about a shark attack, even if we don't go near the beach, than we are about becoming one of the more than 30,000 Americans who are killed by guns each year. And there is probably nothing more dangerous for our children than transporting them by automobile, yet we do so daily.

Our collective response to fear can be wildly irrational as well. Let us never forget that after the World Trade Center was destroyed by the wayward and radical son of a wealthy Saudi Arabian family, hiding in a dark cave in Afghanistan, we Americans decided, gripped in a state of irrational fear, to send our bombs and boys to battle in Bagdad.

Yet today we are gripped by a fear that is all too real.

And with no visible enemy to lash out at. With no weapons to attack the disease, our only recourse is to retreat, to run away, and to hide. And we may tremble in fear of the virus, or of the economic turmoil and financial hardship that may lie ahead. Yet recognizing our fear we also remember that we worship a god that makes us lie down in green pastures, leads us beside still waters and revives our souls.

I don't know who determined that the Psalms were to be placed in the order we find them. However, there is great wisdom evident in the placement of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, the words that came to Jesus' lips at his darkest hour on the cross:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
and are so far from my cry  
and from the words of my distress?”

And the next Psalm, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, is the Psalmist song of praise of a God that restores our soul, liberates us from our fears, and spreads a banquet before us in the presence of our enemies.

The Psalmist knew well both worlds – a world where chaos and fear seem to reign, and a world where peace, restoration and abundance is always on the horizon. And we know both worlds as well. A world

where we cry out in our distress, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And a world where we know that God is present with us and for us.

One of my favorite translations of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm comes from another remarkable musician, Bobby McFerrin, who begins the Psalm this way, “The Lord is my shepherd, I have all I need. The Lord is my shepherd, I have all I need.

It is the assurance we have as a people of God. An assurance that even in our darkest most fear-filled hours, we are not alone. It is that assurance that allows those of us within God’s fold, to remain generous in times of scarcity, to practice love when hate is preached, and to never be consumed by fear. The Lord is our shepherd, we have all we need.