

## Message for April 19, 2020

### **Psalm 23 (King James Version)**

It was fun while it lasted. A friend of my parents who lived across the road from us when I was a child was the leader of the Cub pack sponsored by St. John's United Church in Oakville. It was suggested that I join his pack and so I did. Looking back, it was a positive but short lived experience. As it turned out the leaders of the pack sponsored by my own church, Knox Oakville, were extremely unhappy when they found out that I had joined a pack other than theirs. Their unhappiness was voiced and it left my parents in an awkward position; they didn't want to offend our neighbour but then again, they didn't want to offend our own church either. The upshot was that after one year my "career" in Cubs came to a rather inglorious end.

When I look back I realize that it was a bit of a shame as Cubs enabled me to experience things that I never had before or since. Looking back, one thing that I enjoyed was earning the various badges including the "Religion in Life" badge. There were various requirements that had to be fulfilled in order to earn it but I only remember two of them: we had to memorize and then recite both the Lord's Prayer and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. It's certainly not hard to see why these two were chosen; indeed it is said that if a Christian only knows two things by heart, it will be these two. The Lord's Prayer after all is THE prayer and as for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm? Perhaps like no other passage in the Bible, it comforts us in our times of fear and turmoil. In fact I have long used it as a resource in my own spiritual life. At those times when I feel worried, unsettled or perhaps a bit overwhelmed, I simply quietly recite this psalm to myself and so receive the comfort and peace that it brings. Living in the times that we are, this ancient psalm speaks to us today.

The psalm begins with a wonderful affirmation of trust asserting who and what God is: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." God IS our shepherd, no qualifiers here! And because he is we shall not lack anything that we truly need. This first line however doesn't just assert who and what

God is, it also implies who and what we are to God; we are his flock. To say that we are like sheep though really isn't much of a compliment. This imagery however certainly describes what we are like compared to God. A sheep's eyesight is not very good and a sheep is relatively defenseless too; when confronted by a predator all a sheep can do is run for its life. If sheep are to survive, let alone thrive, they need someone to look after them. Sheep need a shepherd and so it is with us. We need a good shepherd or even THE Good Shepherd to look after us and this we have. Sheep however also need green pastures to eat in and still water to drink from and this the shepherd provides. And just as a shepherd makes sure that his flock has the necessities of life, so too does God with us: "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." God provides us with the necessities of life but our shepherd also knows that we need something more and this is reflected in the next verse.

"He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." God knows that we are not just physical creatures with physical needs. We have spiritual needs as well or, as Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone." God restores our souls and leads us in the paths of righteousness through such as the Ten Commandments but even more so, God does so through and by his Son; his life, teaching, example, death and resurrection. Too often perhaps, we look at God's Law and the teaching of Christ as shackles limiting our freedom. Too often perhaps, we think that our happiness, peace and contentment are to be found in doing what we want when we want but nothing could be further from the truth. Walking on the "paths of righteousness" however actually sets us free to live and experience life as it is meant to be. God though does not just lead us on the paths of righteousness, he does something more.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." This is perhaps the best-known line and promise of the psalm. Even in death's dark terrifying valley God is with us! This is so true but this line also says a whole lot more.

Most modern translations render this line a bit different than the King James Version does. To quote the New International Version for example: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” Yes, God is with us in the valley of the shadow of death but he is also with us in all of the dark valleys we may walk through on life’s journey. As Christ himself said, “Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age.” Indeed the great promise of the psalm isn’t just that God is with us, it also goes on to assert that “thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

A rod was used by a shepherd to ward off any predators that threatened the flock while the staff was what we would call a shepherd’s crook; it was used to guide the sheep and pull them to safety if necessary. God then doesn’t just accompanying us on life’s journey; he is actively involved as well. In short, for us Christians, God is not an idea or theoretical concept far removed and even irrelevant to our lives here and now; he is a present living active reality. Indeed God is not just with us guiding and protecting, he is also doing something more.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” God is not only with us, he also gives us the grace and strength to triumph over our “enemies”, whatever our “enemies” may be. Indeed such is the love of God that he even blesses us: “thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”

There are times in life including the present one when we may feel anything but blest but blest we are. Yes, we live in a world of social distancing, and hardship for many but even so, we are still blest. We can still be in touch with family and friends. Perhaps we can’t get everything we want from the grocery stores but we do not go hungry. To that we can add the many people who are, sometimes at a tremendous cost to both themselves and their families, working in the essential services to ensure that we are looked after and have access to what we really need. We may not realize it or feel so but truly our cups runneth over. And there is still yet another even greater blessing.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” or, if we prefer, quoting the New International Version of the Bible once again: “Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.” Once again this psalm reminds us that God is present and active in our lives; his goodness and mercy/love follows us. Indeed they may do something more than “follow” us. I recently read that the Hebrew word which we translate as “follow” can just as validly be translated “pursue” or “chase”. Think of it! Such is the love of almighty God for each and every one of us that he doesn’t just “follow” us, he chases and pursues us! He will never let us go! We may be tempted to give up on God but he will never ever give up on us! As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, nothing, absolutely nothing has any power whatsoever to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What this means is that we “will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”. Just as the Good Shepherd is with us throughout life’s journey, so we shall be with God and this of course is one of the great promises of what we celebrated last Sunday at Easter, Christ is risen, we are risen.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm truly is one of the best known and best loved passages of the entire Bible but, as with so many other things that we know so well, there is a danger that we may take it for granted. If this were to happen though it would truly be a shame because this short psalm has so much to say to us, especially perhaps at the present time. If and when we feel worried or overwhelmed, perhaps we should sit down, take a deep breath and then either recite or read this beloved psalm. Receive the peace and comfort this psalm can give because truly the Lord is our Shepherd and that is enough.