

July 18, 2021 Pastor Jonna Bohigian
You Are with Me
Psalm 23

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our freshman year of college, a friend and I decided to run the L.A. Marathon. We decided that we would have a hybrid training system – training with the group at school when we wanted, and training on our own the majority of the time. We chose the *flattest* streets and ran in the *cool* of the day. We felt that we had cheated the system by running *when* we wanted and *how* we wanted.

And then race day came. The cool morning quickly melted away in record-breaking heat that caused many elite runners to abscond from the race. Running in that 94-degree heat was a complete *shock* to our systems, and the longer we ran, the more we saw ambulances lining the streets. We became increasingly motivated to drink water when those cups started jutting out. But I *still* didn't drink enough.

Finally, I saw the 26-mile marker, and was *relieved*. The torture was almost over! I was so excited to nearly be finished, that I *sprinted* to the end! But what I thought was the end wasn't. So I *sprinted* to the end again! But *that* wasn't the end either. This happened a *number* of times. Somehow, I had failed to look up to see where the finish line banner was, and instead put my head down and kept sprinting. I *finally* crossed the finish line, but to this day, I don't remember crossing, because I passed out and collapsed. I was taken to a medical tent and whisked away to a nearby hospital to get some fluids.

To top off this eventful day, I discovered a wardrobe malfunction when I returned to my dorm. I looked at myself in the mirror, turned to the side, and realized that I had forgotten to close the back of my hospital gown! I don't think I will ever know how much I *really* embarrassed myself that day!

As we are coming out of hibernation, we recognize that the previous season is not entirely behind us, and we still have a race to finish. A finish line is still before us. It might be tempting to call "uncle" and leave the race, *or* to put our heads down and keep sprinting. But even to put our heads down and keep sprinting is *not* sustainable. It's *exhausting*. And we might not finish if we do that. We *need* space to rest, to drink cool water, to have our souls *revived*.

So today, we *rest* in Psalm 23. Guided by the Shepherd to lie down in beautiful green pastures, to drink from peaceful waters, we experience our very *lives* coming back. It's a beautiful, restorative poem, and it's so much *more*. It's strategically placed immediately after one of the most *jaw-dropping* psalms, the one Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1a). Psalm 23's beginning, middle, and end is a *declaration of trust* in the One who is our Shepherd, both when life is pleasant and when life brings us face to face with evil and death. There is *so much* in this psalm to appreciate!

In Hebrew, Psalm 23 consists of 55 words. The center of those 55 words is the 28th word. And the 28th word is **(word)** "you." In our Bibles, we find "you," this 28th word, in the fourth verse, in the sentence, **(verse)** "I will not be afraid, for *you* are close beside me" (NLT). Or, in another translation, **(verse)** "I will fear no evil, for *you are with me*" (NIV).¹

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-psalm-23-21>

“You” is the central word. This seems significant, and it is punctuated by the first and last words, which are the same in the Hebrew, “Lord.” The *Lord* is what this psalm is all about, and He is not distant; the Lord is *my* shepherd, He is always present, a God with whom we speak directly – *you are with me*.

This psalm is deeply *personal*, and it’s also deeply *communal*. After they were composed, the psalms became a regular part of the worship life of God’s people. As the community sang these intimate words, it was clear that this psalm was for the individual as much as it was for the community. The worshipping community knew that the Lord is *my* shepherd, the Lord is *your* shepherd, and the Lord is *our* shepherd.

This image of shepherd was very familiar to the people of God. Many of their ancestors were shepherds: Abel, Rachel, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David. “Shepherd” was also a title used in reference to their leaders and kings.² We read of prophets like Jeremiah, who prophesied against their leaders, the shepherds who destroyed and scattered the sheep of God’s pasture, instead of bestowing care on them. We hear of God’s promise to place shepherds over them who would tend His sheep (Jer 23:1 – 2, 4). Most significantly, we hear of *God* as His people’s shepherd. In Genesis 48:15, Jacob called Him “the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day.” In the psalms, God was named as Israel’s shepherd, who led them out of captivity in Egypt and into safety. In Isaiah, God was referred to as Israel’s shepherd, who would bring them out of exile and into peace. In Ezekiel, God declared that He would set up a shepherd who would feed them (Eze 34:23). And we later discover that the promised shepherd is Jesus, the Lamb of God.

² James L. Mays, *Interpretation: Psalms*, 117.

As the people of God sang this psalm, they recall these images – images of their ancestors who cared for them and of the God who brought them out of captivity and exile and into *freedom*. This psalm was not an idealistic hope or a sweet poem, but a *declaration of trust* in the One who had proven Himself time and again, through seasons of joy and plenty and through seasons of darkness and death.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me (Ps 23:4a). At times, this verse might seem *far* from reality. Life seems to be falling around you, and you can't control *any* of it. You're angry, disappointed, exhausted, and you feel *alone*. You don't *feel* God. He doesn't seem to be answering your prayers. Whether you pray it or not, your heart feels more akin to Psalm 22, "My God, my God, *why* have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" (Ps 22:1). It might feel *dishonest* to proclaim Psalm 23, with its words of childlike, confident trust.

And that is ok. Not because I'm saying it, but because it's the example of Scripture itself. Why *else* would the psalms give us more examples of crying out in anguish to God, than psalms of praise? Why *else* would Scripture quote Jesus himself on the cross, crying out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34). Scripture allows, and *encourages* us to be honest about how we're feeling – both as individuals *and* as a community. But it doesn't leave us there.

Once we have thoroughly challenged God and let it all out, we are *encouraged* to journey to a place of remembrance, to remember how God has been *our* shepherd, and how he has been *your* shepherd. We remember how God sent us His only Son, the good shepherd, who felt *compassion* for his sheep. He did not leave them to fend for themselves or to be abandoned

by leaders who sought after personal gain. He cared for them as a shepherd does, guiding them in the right paths, desperately seeking after the lost sheep, and placing himself in harm's way so that his sheep might be spared. We remember that Jesus was, and *is*, the good shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep. He did this out of God's great love for us, so that you and I and all creation might be restored, and that God would be glorified.

And, you are encouraged to remember how God has been *your* shepherd, in your lived experience. I invite you to close your eyes and think back over your life. When has God comforted you when you were in distress? When has God been present to you when you felt surrounded by evil and death? When has God provided for you when you were in need? When have you been surprised by the love and *abundance* of God, that you felt it *chasing* after you? You may open your eyes.

Remembering is *powerful*. It brings our past to our present and allows us to hold both together. Remembering is *critical* to our lives of faith, because as much as you and I may desire to experience and see God fully, we don't always. It's not always possible.

This is where not only *remembering*, but *sharing* becomes essential. "The Lord is my shepherd" can be declared because the Lord has also been *your shepherd*.

If he were here, he would have the *biggest grin* as he shared his story with you. Anyone who knows him, knows that he *loves* being the teacher. *Wherever* he is – Sunday school classes, Confirmation, choir, work, when with his neighbors and family, *whenever* and *wherever*, he shares his faith. It's always colored with intentional quips and anecdotes to ensure that *everyone* knows that he was a sinner.

When he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he knew that he was privileged with an *additional* audience – medical staff and other patients. If he has missed any opportunities to share, it has been very few.

A few weeks ago, Jim Guise was placed on hospice. When I went to visit, Jim looked very different from the man I have known. He began to share about friends who had visited, some of whom are not yet Christians. I chuckled when I imagined this scene of Jim in his hospice bed, telling jokes, and still teaching. What more *profound* position to have a captive audience, than when you are facing death? His peace was *so* profound. I knew that I needed to listen. He was ready. He had prepared himself and gotten everything ready for Brenda. He wanted to make the most of the remaining opportunities to love his friends and family, and to share with all who were present, of the goodness and mercy of God.

Last weekend, he had an emergency trip to the hospital, and he thought that this might be the end. He began to prepare himself, but had a successful procedure, and survived! In a recent phone call, he said, “We made it, didn’t we, buddy?! God’s not through with me yet! Even when I am face to face with death, God is with me.”

Our faith is not always strong, no matter *who* we are – a pastor, a child, a “regular person,” or a funny man on hospice. Sometimes it seems like our faith is as weak as *straw*, so we *need* to hear these stories! We *need* to hear Jim’s story. We *need* to hear each other’s stories. We need to *share* our stories. Because it’s true – in *my* life, in *your* life, and in *our* lives, The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for *You are with me*.

To God be the glory! Amen.