

“The Very Best Part!”

Sermon: Year B, Easter 4

Texts: Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16–24

Preached: April 22, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

I have heard the 23rd Psalm this past week more often than I’ve wanted to. A week ago yesterday, we recited it at George Shiff’s funeral. Thursday, I led people in reciting it at the funeral I conducted for our nephew’s son, who dropped dead of a heart attack at age 37. Friday, it was used at the funeral mass for Tom’s cousin, who had committed suicide. And today, I hear it in a very different context. Many of us can recite it by heart, though we sometimes get tripped up because language has changed, translations have changed. Still, though, it’s one of the most recognizable pieces of scripture, known and loved even by folks who aren’t particularly into the “church thing.” I’m going to admit something, though: I often stumble when I recite it. I was mortified last week as I was leading the assembly at George’s funeral to scan ahead and realize that in my cutting and pasting, I had messed up the line about “dwelling in the Lord’s house.” I could sense the confusion as we read aloud, as people doubted their memories.

This was not the first time I had gotten the 23rd Psalm out of whack. I had gone to visit Chris, a parishioner who was fighting pancreatic cancer. She was going in for major surgery, and she and her husband had accepted my offer to come and pray with them very early that morning. We prayed together, and then Chris said, “Pastor, could you say the 23rd Psalm? The traditional version?” I went into a bit of performance anxiety... or maybe it was my lack of coffee. I launched in, but got bollixed up a bit right at the start, tripping on the words that I knew that I knew, and suddenly worrying whether I had them in the right order. My mind raced ahead to the next lines to make sure I was going to get them right, so it became even harder to focus on where I was. I stumbled through, blushing, and Chris smiled a bit, politely, but one of those smiles that says, “Thanks for trying,” so I knew that I hadn’t done it quite right. I resolved to memorize it a bit better for future use—or else remember always to bring my little pastor’s “cheat book” with me.

I left, telling them that I would be back to look in on them. All day long, my mind kept coming back to that Psalm, running it line by line, thinking perhaps I had done it in the wrong order. Finally, at 3 AM I bolted awake and said to myself, “You idiot! You left out the ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil’ part! That was what she most wanted to hear!” Lying there in bed, I could recite it perfectly. When I went to visit them that morning, Chris thanked me for having come the previous day, then looked at me over her glasses and said, “But you get an ‘F’ on the 23rd Psalm. You left out the best part.” Indeed, I had left out the best part, the Good News that Chris needed to hear that day. I had left out those amazing words of assurance that even in the darkest places in our lives, we have a Shepherd watching over us. But then I started asking myself, what is the best part of this psalm? And I realized that there is not one line of this psalm that is not the best part.

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is that strong declaration right at the beginning that YHWH is my shepherd. The Hebrew doesn’t say “the LORD,” but names God’s own, personal name, that name so holy that an observant Jew won’t speak it out of sheer awe, but will say “Adonai”—“the LORD”—or “Ha-Shem,” “the Name.” That one so holy and powerful is *my* shepherd! I have a Good Shepherd!

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is that assertion that I shall never be in want. The Shepherd to whom I belong, in spite of my fears of lack, is going to make sure that I am provided for, that I will never lack for anything that I need—not everything I desire, but everything I need. It’s an assertion of confidence, a reminder to me that God has provided for me up to this point, and a declaration of faith that my Shepherd will *always* make sure that my needs are provided for. I have a Good Shepherd!

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is that reminder that when I am hungry and weary, and just worn out, my Shepherd is going to lead me out of desert places to find lush green fields where my hunger can be satisfied, where my weary body and spirit will be able to eat my fill, then lie down and rest. I have a Good Shepherd!

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is that when I am thirsting, feeling dried out and parched, when I feel as though I am going to wither up in the desert heat, my Shepherd is going to lead me to a place where my thirst will be quenched, where I can find calm and peace, where I can drink deeply. I have a Good Shepherd!

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is that declaration that my Shepherd restores my soul. Literally, the Hebrew says, “He brings back to me the breath of life.” We’ve all had those times of feeling that our breath has been taken away, sucked out of us, knocked out of us. We’ve all had those times of feeling as though our lives

are totally out of control. We've all known those times of wondering if we even know who we are anymore. But my Shepherd is watchful, and can see that I need to stop and rest, that I need to catch my breath again. My Shepherd can restore me to who I am. And my Shepherd will literally breathe back into me the breath of life...that's what we celebrate in this Easter season. I have a Good Shepherd!

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is the assurance that my Shepherd is going to lead me down the right paths simply because that is his nature. He's got a reputation for doing just that. I just have to keep my eyes on him and follow, and not go wandering off. I have a Good Shepherd!

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is that assurance that, even when those paths lead through a death-dark valley—that's literally what the Hebrew says—I don't have to be afraid that this is the end, because my Shepherd is right there with me, with powerful protection, and he's going to lead me out of the valley. This isn't just talking about approaching physical death. It's talking about our entire journey through life, a journey that will sometimes lead through valleys that are so dark that they might as well be death, places where we can't see our hands—or our hooves—in front of our faces, places where we look over our shoulders, if sheep have shoulders, wondering what is going to jump out of the dark. But the Good News is that, whether the darkness is a rough time or even if it is death itself, my Shepherd is right there in the dark with me, guiding, protecting, moving me through the darkness to light-filled meadows of nourishment, to those pools of water where I can drink deeply once more, to a place where I can once again breathe deep into my lungs the breath of life. I do not face the darkness alone. I have a Shepherd who has already walked through this darkness himself, who knows this pathway all too well, and who has already come out on the other side, so he knows where he's going. The Good News is that my Shepherd loves me so much that he laid down his own life, and took it up again just to prove that there was no length to which he would not go to prove his love for me. That is the Good News of Easter. I have a Good Shepherd!

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is that, even though battles are raging around me, right in the middle of the battlefield my Shepherd lays out a sumptuous banquet, and welcomes me as an honored guest, pouring fragrant, perfumed oil on my head so that it drips down and fills my nostrils with the sweet smell, and then fills my cup so abundantly that it overflows. This banquet that we celebrate each week should remind us of that. I have a Good Shepherd!

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is that my Shepherd's goodness, my Shepherd's loyal kindness, my Shepherd's all-encompassing mercy and love for me, is not just going to follow along behind me, but literally, is going to *pursue* me, to chase me down. There is no place that I can wander off that my Shepherd can't find me—and he does come looking for me. It's like in one of those dreams where you're being chased, and you turn and your pursuer is already there...God's already there before I even get there, but this time in a good way. There is nothing I can do that will prevent God's love from tracking me down, every single day of my life, even if I'm not looking for it. I have a Good Shepherd!

The best part of the 23rd Psalm is that all of my paths, no matter how crooked, no matter how perilous, lead back home to my Shepherd's house, to safety, to a place where I belong, and that is not just after death...it's right now, all the days of my life. I have a Good Shepherd!

But just as I stumbled and forgot the best part in Chris's hospital room, I think we all forget that we have a Good Shepherd. We need to be reminded of that. We need to remind one another in times of forgetfulness. That's one of the reasons we come together as a flock in this place, to remind one another that we are the flock that belongs to the Good Shepherd. And in death-dark places, we can be the presence of the Shepherd to others.

So now I'm going to recite the 23rd Psalm. But I'm not going to say it alone. I want you to say it with me. Don't worry if you don't remember all the words...neither did your pastor! But as you say it, listen to yourself and remind yourself of the ways in which God demonstrates fierce love to you. Listen to the other voices in the assembly, and if you've forgotten the words, or if you've forgotten God's goodness and mercy, let them remind you of it, let them announce that Good News to you once again.

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." What is the best part for you today? AMEN