

## PSALM 23

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday in Lent, February 25, 2018, as part of a Lenten sermon series on Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms, March 3, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Passage

*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.*

You may be disappointed that I am not Patrick Hunnicutt, the previously advertised preacher for today. Your disappointment is understandable. But as both our schedules grew complex this week and next, we decided to switch riders though not horses, so I am preaching on Psalm 23 today and Patrick on Psalm 133 at the early service next Sunday.

At 11:00 a.m. next Sunday our choir will be joined by the choir from St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Burke, for a presentation of the Chichester Psalms, composed by Leonard Bernstein. The five psalms in this composition are the basis for all our sermons in Lent.

### I.

Psalm 23 is not a difficult psalm to preach, as you might imagine. Like the Gloria Patri, Doxology, Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed, it constitutes a language and music of our faith which becomes a part of who we are that is deeper than the theological meaning of its words. In a world in which, even on its better days, things seem unpredictable and unstable, to have a house of worship to which to turn each Sunday, a home in which to recite or sing words that are familiar, comforting, challenging, and true is an invaluable experience we call "sanctuary." It is one reason the Irish poet Philip Larkin wrote:

A serious house on serious earth [church] is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in...<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, "Church Going," available at <http://www.artofeurope.com/larkin/lar5.htm>.

We “gravitate” with our “hunger” to “this ground,” to this building, to this pew, once again, to be fed, by texts like Psalm 23, which “never can be obsolete.”

## II.

As the words of Psalm 23 flow from our hearts and our lips they seem easy and natural. In our naivety about the craft of writing, we may assume that they came from the psalmist’s heart to his lips in one natural burst of affection. But believe me, they did not.

In doing a bit of study on this psalm this week, I learned something<sup>2</sup> about the way it is written, the way it is constructed.

- In Hebrew the first and last word of the Psalm is YHWH – “the Lord” – the name of God wrapped around the psalm just as God is wrapped around the psalmist.
- In addition, the psalm contains only twenty-six words, and at the center of these words are its central theme and affirmation - the phrase, “Thou art with me.”
- So the psalm begins with the word “the Lord,” makes its way through a dozen words to affirm “Thou art with me,” and then walks through a dozen more words and ends with “the Lord.”
- In a people whose major experience of God has been corporate and communal – God calling Abraham and Sarah to become *a great nation*<sup>3</sup> and God leading that *nation* out of slavery in Egypt<sup>4</sup> into the Promised Land<sup>5</sup> – Psalm 23 is a rare but important statement of *individual intimacy* with God. It depicts God the shepherd and a *single* sheep, not a flock; God the host and a *single* guest, not a banquet.
- For the psalmist to proclaim “the Lord is *my* shepherd” is an affirmation of an individual’s *personal faith in* and sense of *closeness with* God.

What I make of all this is the following: As easy as the psalm is for us to recite, the craftsmanship in its writing reflects significant spiritual effort, over time, on the part of the psalmist.

Writing is hard work. It takes thought. It takes precision. It takes emotional honesty about oneself and one’s experiences. It often takes blood, sweat, and tears.

- The writing teacher John Gardner once told his students: “The characters you create for your novels and short stories should so live in your heads that want to charge them rent.”
- Colleagues described one writer as “spending all morning deciding whether or not to put a comma in, and all afternoon deciding whether or not to take it out.”

Most writers only write three or four hours a day, and many of them start at 5:00 or 6:00 a.m. when the mind is freshest; the heart, it’s most vulnerable; the world, not yet awake to intrude.

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<sup>2</sup> The information that follows comes from *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), Psalm 23:1-6n, pages 771-772.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12:1-4.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 14.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua 1-2.

In Psalm 23, the psalmist has taken a time in his life when he has been close to God – perhaps an experience that only lasted a moment or so – and then crafted, over time, a poem for the ages. He has taken an experience in which he has known God most intimately and from it carefully constructed a poem he can share with others. Because the Lord has been the psalmist’s shepherd, reading his psalm, we can come to know the Lord as our shepherd as well. We can recall those moments of intimacy we may have had with God. We can be emboldened to share them with those closest to us or with those not so close to us, in the right time, at the right place, perhaps written, perhaps spoken.

“The Lord is our Shepherd,” and that is something we can share with others.

### III.

There is another aspect of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm I feel both compelled but hesitant to address today. This psalm is one of 73 of the 150 psalms in the Bible that are attributed to David, as either him being the author of the psalm or the psalm having been written in his memory or honor.<sup>6</sup> Psalm 23 is labeled: “A Psalm of David.” David the shepherd boy.<sup>7</sup> David the slayer of Goliath.<sup>8</sup> David the king of Israel.<sup>9</sup> David the ancestor to Christ.<sup>10</sup>

But it is also David, “the abuser” of Bathsheba, David the engineer of the death of her husband Uriah,<sup>11</sup> the commander of his most elite troops.

Some of you may recall that over a decade ago I preached a summer sermon series on David. The following summer, I preached on the people surrounding David. In addition, I led a Men’s Retreat on this Biblical character. Since the earliest days of my ministry, I have found David to be one of the two or three most complex and compelling characters in the Bible.

While I neither idolize David nor dismiss him, it is hard for me to think about David in the light in which I have previously considered him in these times – in which the courage of women coming forward has given many of us – women and men alike – a deeper understanding of how painful, humiliating, and dehumanizing it is have a powerful person like David invade us in ways no human being should ever invade another.

What are we to do with David in light of what he did to Bathsheba?

- Are we to remove him from his role as “the sweet psalmist of Israel”?<sup>12</sup> *It’s too late for that; he’s already dead.*
- Are we to remove all 73 of the psalms attributed to him from the Bible, as well as most of the Books of Samuel and Kings, the ending of the Book of Ruth, and the genealogies of Matthew and Luke? *That, too, will not work. You cannot unmake a Woody Allen movie.*
- Are we simply to excise the story of what David did to Bathsheba, as did the Book of Chronicles? *It doesn’t work, the story still gets out.*

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<sup>6</sup> A good explanation of the shades of meaning of “A psalm of David” is found in Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), page 8.

<sup>7</sup> I Samuel 16:1-13.

<sup>8</sup> I Samuel 17.

<sup>9</sup> II Samuel 2:1-7.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth 4:18-21; Matthew 1:1.

<sup>11</sup> II Samuel 11.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 23:1 KJV.

Like so many other books of the Bible, the psalms are the product of flawed characters – seriously flawed characters – who were still used by God for our learning and edification. And sometimes that learning comes from reading their stories, listening to their words, and seeing how *not* to be.

The only way I can resolve my mixed feelings about David *so far* is to say that the David who wrote the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm is also the David who wrote the 51<sup>st</sup> psalm:

- “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,” David said in Psalm 51, “and cleanse me from my sin.”
- “Purge me with hyssop...wash me, and make me clean.”
- “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and put a new and right spirit within me.”
- “Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.”

Psalm 51 is introduced with these words:

*A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba.*

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We don't know necessarily know when these psalms were written, but the framers of the Biblical canon have attributed both Psalm 23 *and* Psalm 51 to David.

- Perhaps David wrote “The Lord is my shepherd” when he was he was young and innocent, filled with a childlike sense of wonder discovering a four leaf clover beneath a bright blue sky, or recalling a time he held hands with his peers and sang around a campfire the closing night of a youth retreat.
- Perhaps then, after Nathan confronted him over what he had done to Bathsheba, he wrote Psalm 51, having lose his youthful sense of God's presence and spent the rest of his life praying – unsuccessfully – for its return. That would match our sense of justice for David.
- Or, on the other hand, perhaps David wrote the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm well after his abuse of Bathsheba, well after the death of their infant son that followed,<sup>13</sup> well after the rape of his only daughter Dinah by one of his sons Amnon and the killing of that son by David's favorite son Absalom,<sup>14</sup> well after the armed rebellion against David fomented by Absalom and Absalom's death at the hands of David's soldiers,<sup>15</sup> Was it written on his behalf well after the palace intrigue that swirled around his deathbed as Bathsheba and Nathan made sure that David designated their surviving son Solomon as his successor.<sup>16</sup>

None of this we know for sure, but this I hope: After the horror of what David did, the horror its consequences unleashed in his life, the life of his family, the life of his kingdom, I hope that David experienced, somehow, a moment of grace, a moment of redemption, a instance in which the dark night of guilt was lifted from his soul and a ray of light enabled him to take up penitent pen and write:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

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<sup>13</sup> II Samuel 12:14-23.

<sup>14</sup> II Samuel 13.

<sup>15</sup> II Samuel 18.

<sup>16</sup> I Kings 1.

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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 for ever.*

I believe his psalm leaves us with a promise that no matter what we have done, no matter what we have experienced or suffered, no matter what suffering we have inflicted on others, we can still cling to the promise around which this psalm is constructed –  
“Thou art with me.”

That is the way  
I have come to be able to hear  
This wonderful psalm  
As a psalm of David  
In these days.

Amen.