

“Our Shepherd King”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
March 30, 2014

The main scripture today is Psalm 23, and Psalm 23, as many of you know, is probably the most familiar scripture (perhaps besides John 3:16) among Christians, and perhaps even Jews.

I was telling the Sunday School class this morning that I think that I have done somewhere between 80 and 100 funerals in my lifetime and, of those funerals, probably 95% of those funerals have within the service a reading of Psalm 23. Psalm 23 is obviously a Psalm of comfort. It is a Psalm which we associate, in a sense, with death because of its role in funerals, but Psalm 23 is really about life. It is really about the God that we are all in pursuit of, the God who is in pursuit of us, and it is, in a sense, a Psalm that helps to tell us what God is like. At least for the Israelites, who used the Psalms as prayers, who wrote them as prayers for the community, Psalm 23 was about the characteristics of God as they understood God, so I just want to touch base on those characteristics of God from Psalm 23.

The scripture that Russ read from Ezekiel 34 is a really powerful example of how ancient Israel understood their God, and one of the ways that ancient Israel talked about God was of God as a shepherd, and the translation of God as a Shepherd is, quite frankly, God as King; so, when they said that their king was to be a shepherd, they were talking about a person (Israel had many, many kings—we know, most familiar being King David and King Solomon, but there were many kings), but they thought about their kings as shepherds.

Now, what is interesting about that passage in Ezekiel that Russ read was, as I understand that, it is about God taking the role of Shepherd when the God of Israel was really frustrated with the kings of Israel, so what you may have heard is that, in that scripture that Russ read, 12 times in 6 verses it says “I will”—that is, God is saying “I will be the Shepherd, I will rescue the sheep, I will feed the sheep because the kings have just not been able to do it”, so there is this interesting transposition of the kings of Israel being substituted for by their God who says “I will do it” because, frankly, in that text God is frustrated with the kings of Israel who are feeding themselves, who are at the pork barrel feeding, getting themselves fat, getting themselves well clothed, and this is not the intent of a king of Israel. That is not in the job description, so God intervenes and says “I will do it”. There is an interesting transition there.

One of the ideas of Israel is that God is to be King and, in that, God is to be, in a sense, their final political leader. God will provide food and resources that will enable the people to live securely. God will take care of the people, and as I thought about God as King and kings as shepherds, I thought, when was the last time we thought about our king, our president of our nation, as having the responsibility for seeing to it that we are okay, that our president (whoever that is) and that our president’s job description would be to see to it that we are okay. That is one of the ways that Israel thought about their kings. Their responsibilities were to make sure that their people were healthy and taken care of and had what they needed—not what they wanted, but what they needed. So, God as King is one of the characteristics of God in Psalm 23.

A second image of God in Psalm 23 is God as provider. That is this idea that God gives us what we need. God provides for us what we need in life. I don’t know how it is for all of you, but I come to church, not just because it is my job (I have come to church most of my lifetime.), but I come to church because I need something. I need something, and I come to church looking for what it is that I need. What we all need is human interaction. What we all need is interaction with God, and what we all need is unconditional love. We need to be stimulated and offered new wisdom and ways of living because, without some sort of path in our lives, we wander. We get lost in the wilderness. We come to church seeking something that we need and, of course, all of us need a little something

different from one another. We all have needs, and they are all a little bit different.

One of the reasons I know that we all have needs and they are all different is in my experience of preaching. Most preachers will tell you, and this is probably true, that when I give a sermon and I have this point that I am driving home, and I think I have really hit it, someone at the door in the morning will say “You know what you said about that little thing about that? That really spoke to me” and I would think, well that’s not what the sermon was about, but that was what they needed to hear.

I remember doing a sermon in New Orleans, where I talked about this one issue and I was commenting on this issue, and in a side comment, I said “You, know, when I was in college and I stayed away from church and I didn’t go at all, and didn’t even know if I believed in God, I was just out there”, then I went back to that one point that I was driving home and you know this one guy said “Man, I wandered away from church for so long. Thank God you said that.” We all have something that we need when we come to church, and God makes it so that we can hear it. That’s a real relief.

In the Psalm, there are words about the restoration of our souls. There are words about the resources for life. The green pastures and the still waters are really about the sheep getting the food, the water, the sustenance they needed in life, so God is the provider of the things that we need.

Psalm 23 is interesting in that it is also very clear about God being our protector, and the language there is “rod and staff”. “Rod” is a reference to a club that will help fend off wild animals that would attack the sheep. Those things that would attack us in our lives, God provides protection from that which can do us in. How that protection comes is a little more complicated, and I’m not sure I have figured that out, but our faith helps us understand what are the sources of life and what are the things in life that move us toward death, what are the things in life that give us joy and satisfaction and meaning, and what are those things in life that move us into the wilderness and make us feel like we are lost. I understand the “rod” as being the wisdom that we pick up through our faith journey so that we can start to identify the things that get us in trouble and the things that bring us meaning and happiness. Of course, that is a big process that we go through, but it is so reassuring when we get to that point in life when we know those things in our lives that get us into trouble.

I often hear, sometimes when I am having a nostalgic conversation with high school buddies, the phrase that will be something like “Ah, man, I wish was 16 again”, and at point I am out of the conversation because I wouldn’t go back to 16 for all the money in the world because at 16 (and later in life), I didn’t know what dragged me down. I didn’t know those things that were moving me towards confusion and bewilderedness, pain and loss, and so forth and so on. It is so much fun to be at a higher level of maturity and understanding about life. I still make errors but not as many and not as bad. I attribute that to our God who wants to protect us. He wants us to understand what is our life’s meaning and what are the forces in life that drag us down, so I am grateful for God who is our protector. The rod fends off the wild animals. The staff pulls us in from wandering, gets around our necks and pulls us in. This is our God who really wants us to stay in the flock. He wants us to be around people who keep us healthy and on target.

Psalm 23 says “God leads me, the Shepherd leads me, in right paths to safety, away from predators and through the darkest valleys”. For me, that phrase “through the darkest valleys” is the most comforting piece of scripture in that Psalm because my experience of life is that dark valleys are there for all of us. Whether we choose these dark valleys through our poor choices, or whether they just kind of come our way, how we get through the darkest valleys is critically important. It is like the question “How do we respond to the difficult moments in our lives?” How do we respond to the losses? Do we learn from our losses? Do we learn from our poor decisions and get better, or do those poor choices, bad decisions and darkest valleys overwhelm us? As protector, God guides us through those dark valleys if we are listening. God is with us in those darkest moments, giving us the help and guidance that we need.

Finally, God is King, God is Provider, God is Protector, God is Host. In the imagery of Psalm 23, God is setting up a table for us in the presence of our enemies. The enemies of our lives, of God's people, are always lurking, and God as Host sets up this table, this banquet, for us, even while the enemies are lurking. When I hear that verse, what I hear is that when we are in a relationship with God, when we are deeply in communion with God, we find a home. We find the security of home. We find the warmth of home, the safety and the love of home.

As we all know, a house does not make a home. A house provides a place from which a home can develop. I read a report one time that said that people who are leaving work in their cars tend to drive fast to get home. That is when most speeding tickets are given—when people are leaving work and heading home, and at the moment when they feel relaxed and at peace is when they pull in their driveways. When people pull into their driveways.... "Ah!" They are home again. That is the safe place. It is where our food is, it's where our love is, it's where our support is, it's where our sense of safety is, so God as Host is there preparing a table for us in the wilderness, right in front of our enemies.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is the Shepherd King, and we are Christians who follow Jesus, and this imagery is of Jesus who will be taking care of us, like the Shepherd King in Psalm 23. Jesus is that one who reaches out to us. It is through Jesus that we experience God's protection and God's care and God as our parent who looks after us. So, it is always good to come into church, because it is here and in many, many other places in our lives that we can experience the God who is our Shepherd God, and we give thanks for that God of love, the God who is our King and our protector, the God who looks after us and provides for us what we need, and if we remain in conversation with God, God will remain our Shepherd, drawing us back when we wander, giving us safety in the darkness, and giving us what we need to thrive in our lives. We give thanks this day for God's presence in our lives and God's presence in our lives together at Peace Church. Thanks be to God. Amen.