

PSALM 23

A Psalm of David.

¹ The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. ³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. ⁶ 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.

The Lord Is My Shepherd

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Psalm 23*

With your permission, I would like to tell you a personal story this morning. Though it is personal, I tell not to shine a spotlight on myself, but because each of us has a version of this story within us. It is painful, but I tell it not to evoke your sympathy but because I know that no one, none of us, escapes excruciating pain. I tell it to you because if nothing else, our common faith and our life together in this community are the primary resources we have to redeem the hurts and losses that life throws at us. So, finally, I tell it to you not indulge in tragedy, but to wonder at our God's capacity to restore our souls.

Father's Day 1955 broke clear and warm in the Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts, the kind of day that promised that school would soon be out and our sandlot baseball games could be every morning of the week. It's funny how days on which enormous events take place you remember the oddest small things. The red sandstone and green foliage of Sugarloaf Mountain stood out against a deep blue sky. I remember that. My Uncle Ed, who wasn't much older than me, had a goose, which is another story altogether. Suffice it to say that a goose is a menace when it runs loose in town. That day I remember the goose snuck up behind Grandpa Clem while he was changing a tire on the old Studebaker and bit him in the butt. Then I remember that old Mr. Connolly backed his black Chevrolet into a telephone pole backing out of his driveway. It was pretty gentle, and neither the car nor the pole suffered. But I remember thinking he must have backed out of his driveway on Mountain Road more than a thousand times, and that pole had always been there. And I wondered if he hit it every time. Maybe it was his own personal backstop.

Odd things to remember. I recall the kind of lazy whiling away my time. I decided to go back from my grandparents to our house, across Sugarloaf Street. When I got to the street, there on the other side was my youngest brother, Sherman. He was two-and-a-half, and his vocabulary was coming along. But he was a wise-guy, so what he reveled in saying the most was, "Shut up Pee, Pee." He'd utter his naughty sentence and then he'd light up in laughter at how cleverly naughty he was.

There we stood across the street from one another, me still not nine and he two-and-a-half. How what happened next took place I still don't know exactly. It is a blur. There was a screech of tires. Instinctively, I ran across the street. The only thing I remember was the hood of a red car coming at me, which I just avoided, as I dashed across the street to the scene of the accident.

My memory contains a jerky slide show of images and sounds still imprinted on my mind. Sirens. My mother weeping over my still baby brother. The young driver, in a baseball uniform, blank with shock, his girlfriend crumpled in tears.

Later that day, or maybe it was the next day, my father and the minister came to my aunt Anne's house, where we had been taken. Trying to retain his composure, he looked at me, the

oldest. The only words he could manage were, “Sherm’s gone.” I remember standing there feeling so small and helpless, tears flowing down my face, sobbing. I could find no words to say.

On that bright sunny Father’s Day in 1955 life changed. For a long time it was never out of my mind, and I am certain it was the same for the others in my family. But I don’t remember many of the details of those days; they remain foggy to me. Gradually, I guess, we began trying to pick up our lives again. Only one thing do I remember well. I’m not sure when it started. But the one thing I recall vividly from that time was that we learned the 23rd Psalm. The four of us children, Chris and Sue and Jeff and me, would stand in front of the fireplace every evening as we went to bed and recite it to our parents.

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Think about those words. They seem so incongruous to the reality we were facing. I shall not want? He restoreth my soul? Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me? Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life? Did I not have evidence that they were all false. Comfort, restoration, and mercy; it wouldn’t take a genius to understand that the very thing that prompted us to stand before the fireplace every evening contradicted the very words we were reciting. And yet, even at that young age I heard the truth ringing in them. Despite the apparent contradictions, I felt God’s presence when we intoned them. I somehow felt that it was true, I was living in the house of the Lord, and would be forever.

So here we are, at the real crux of this corner of our religious life and faith, the corner where we face tragedy and loss. It is here that Marx would find evidence that religion is the opiate of the people, a kind of drug with which to fool yourself about reality. Where Marx would find in religion a weakness, his predecessor, the great philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, would believe that in religion there was actually great danger.

Nietzsche, you may recall, was enthralled with the idea of a super-race. He detested religion, and especially Christianity because, as Ray Cotton says, “He believed that if [hu]mankind sought to show responsibility toward the poor and weak, then the losers would be in control.”¹ Ravi Zacharias writes, “So profound and operative was Nietzsche's philosophy upon Hitler, that it provided the conceptual framework for his demogical onslaught to obliterate the weak and inferior of this world.”²

There is a view of the world, of which people like Nietzsche and Hitler are only the most extreme examples. This view of the world believes that the strong and the smart not only will

¹http://www.origins.org/articles/cotton_holocaustideas.html

²Ravi Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1990), p. 17.

survive, but they also ought be the ones to survive. And they ought to thrive. The weak, on the other hand, do not deserve to survive, and here you might think of the various arguments about poor people getting what they deserve and how they are a drag on society. In this view of the world, the growing disparity between the rich and the poor is but a sign of how things ought to be. It is a view of the world that has a lot of currency. Research finds that even many people who are harmed by the view nonetheless support it. In this version of things, at least when religious terms are employed, if you're right with God, then things will be good for you. However, if things are not well with you, then you're not pleasing God. There is real irony here that even religious traditions like Christianity are distorted, as Yogi Berra would observe, to say what they don't say.

Well, all of this is a long way from a boyhood tragedy on a long ago Father's Day. But how I got here is in this fashion: most of us subscribe to a version of reality that says we get what we deserve. Thankfully, for most of us, it is a much more benign version of the idea than Nietzsche and Hitler held. But it is not completely benign. For the truth of the matter is that it causes us to live in a state of anxiety and denial. Think about Donald Trump. He has built a financial empire. He's in control. He shouts out with bravado, "You're fired." But look at that silly comb-over. What's that about? And for crying out loud, he's now sixty. His first wife became too old for him. His second wife became too old for him. His new wife, a super-model in her thirties, works for now. But what I see is a man obsessed with living the lie, who behind the wealth and overbearing persona, is a man scared to death by his own version of reality. To be on the top of the world, to be the winner, to have it all—that's what it's all about. Try as he may to keep it from happening, already it is all slipping through his fingers.

Most of us run into the fact that life isn't a bowl of cherries at some point, usually at several points. Maybe we're able to comb-over the bald spots for awhile. Maybe sometimes we can pretend that we're in control nonetheless. But for most of us, this idea that we have things under control and all is well at some point comes crashing down, crashing down painfully, as we live in life's vagaries.

Much to our surprise, we may find ourselves whispering, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Maybe it will seem out of place. Is there a shepherd guiding us? Are we not filled with want, with grief and longing? Maybe we will wonder if we are engaging in wishful thinking. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." We may find ourselves asking ourselves why we are saying these words. Are not our pastures submerged? Are we not drowning in the midst of a roaring flood?

"He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.⁴ 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." To be sure, we recognize that we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Of that there can be no doubt. But fearing no evil? Feeling comfort? Where are these words coming from?

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.⁶ 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. Goodness and mercy shall follow us? We will dwell in the house of the Lord forever? It seems so unlikely; are we not experiencing quite the opposite?

And, yet, these words begin to captivate us. They begin to convince us. They begin to

convict us. Something, the Holy Spirit, maybe, draws us into their cadence. Burdens lift from our hearts. In the midst of the keenest agony and the most sorrowful tears, right there standing next to the pain, not erasing it, but standing next to it, holding it, embracing it, we grasp, even as we weep and moan, that what is all wrong is somehow alright. The equation that says that the presence of God equals God giving us what we want is shattered. Indeed, we begin to see that our addiction to getting what we want makes no room for God at all. We begin to see the fallowness of the world we have tried to construct. It has no green pastures and no still waters. It is an arid world of a million illusions.

Nietzsche feared nothing as much as he feared religion. He could not abide the paradox that the meek or the weak would inherit the earth. The strong, the first-place finishers would inherit the earth, he bellowed, and they didn't need the crutch of a God of the weak to do it. In the end madness overcame him. For when his illusions burst, he had no prayers to say, no God to hold his heart, no shepherd to take him by the hand.

I would give almost anything to have that Father's Day in 1955 back, to do something to change the way it happened. And I know I'm not alone in such wishes. I'm sure we each have many such days we'd like to have had happen differently. For the point is not that our losses and our suffering are good for us. Very often they are not. But for many of us our sufferings are the way we learn that controlling our world is impossible and that trying to leads to more destruction than almost anything else in life.

In the face of that fact, in the face of what inevitably befalls us in life, the best we may be able to do is stand in front of the fireplace and recite those ancient words, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Are they but an opiate to dull the sting of what the world dishes out? For my money, the narcotics in this story are the comb-over and the illusion of control. They fog the senses. But the Psalm we pray when we are inconsolable and helpless, and the hand of God that reaches out to lead us through the valley of the shadow of death, and the realization that despite all we have been through, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever—these things are the product of a sharpened mind, and they free our hearts to live fully in the light of the truth and in the warmth of God's mercy. The Lord is my shepherd. Thanks be to God. Amen.