

## **Psalm 23**

**August 23, 2020**

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Comfort food is a real thing. Certainly, some of us rely on food for comfort more than others, but I would guess most of us could name a meal or dessert that, when we eat it screams, “Everything is going to be okay.” In our family, lasagna is one of those meals. Over the years, lasagna has helped us celebrate birthdays, sports victories, great report cards, friendships, hellos and even good-byes. What are your comfort foods? Share them with us on Facebook. To be clear, in light of what’s happening in the world, probably many of us need new comfort food ideas.

So, what is it about these this food that gives us a sense of well-being? I’m sure there are physiological reasons we feel all is well when we eat a big slice of Aunt Betty’s pie, but I think there are also psychological reasons too. For me, it is the memories triggered by the food that brings comfort. Eating lasagna or pizza or grandma’s chocolate cake reminds us of the times we have eaten those delicious things before. We are reminded of the big kitchen table or the favorite pizzeria where we ate them and, most importantly, the people with whom we ate. One bite of that “whatever it is” and all those memories come flooding right back. There is comfort in that familiarity. That’s how I feel about the texts I’ve chosen for the next two weeks.

Having finished a sermon series last week, I found myself kind of at loose ends early this week as I wondered what I should preach on as summer winds down. I gave myself permission to do whatever I wanted, to dismiss all of the “ought tos” and “should dos” that govern most of my preaching decisions. For a minute, I felt a little overwhelmed by all of the choices before me. And then...I felt freedom. I could really preach on whatever I wanted to. So, what did I want to spend time reading about and studying this week? I quickly realized I just wanted to read something that would make me feel better, something that would bring me comfort. I didn’t want to explore obscure texts and dazzle you with my academic prowess. I just wanted to read and talk about what I know, what is familiar. And so, I landed on Psalm 23 this week and 1 Corinthians 13 aka The Love Chapter next week.

These texts don't have much in common, one of them is song from the Hebrew Bible, the other is part of a letter from the New Testament. They do have a couple of similarities though. First, they are probably two of the most beloved and familiar texts in the whole Bible. Even people who haven't spent much time in church or much time reading the Bible generally recognize these passages, at least enough to think, "Hey, that's from the Bible." Secondly, they are so familiar because both are used extensively at times other than Sunday morning worship. In fact, I would estimate that 75% of the weddings I officiate include at least part of 1 Corinthians 13, you know, "Love is patient. Love is kind..." And Psalm 23 is read at probably 90% of the funerals I officiate. When I help families plan their loved one's funeral, I ask if the person we are honoring had a favorite Bible story or Bible verses. Psalm 23 is often their answer. And I get it. In my own life, I have experienced both Psalm 23 and 1 Corinthians 13 as balm to my soul, so it is a gift I have given myself to preach about them. I hope it will be a gift to you too.

So, first, Psalm 23. Theologian and author, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, famously said, about Psalm 23, "It is almost pretentious to comment on this psalm."<sup>1</sup> What he meant by that is it is so well-written and so relevant to human experience that it does not need the comments of a preacher. It stands on its own. And he's right. However, in a surprise to no one, I am going to comment anyway.

When Psalm 23 is read at funerals, I have noticed people taking a deep breath and relaxing in their seats. I watch people in the congregation silently mouthing the words of each verse along with the person who is reading. Sometimes families reach over and hold the hand of the person sitting next to them. Generally, it seems like the words of this psalm act a bit like a release valve, releasing a bit of tension in the room. So, take a deep breath, relax on your couch or your favorite chair, and just listen. This is Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggeman, Walter, *The Message of the Psalms*, (Augsburg Publishing House: Minneapolis, 1984), 154.

<sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
    I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
    your rod and your staff—  
        they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me  
    in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
    my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
    all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
    my whole life long.

Ironically, while many of us are familiar with this psalm because of its prevalence in funerals, Psalm 23 is much more about life than it is about death. I think the Story Bible Callie read from this morning framed it just right. David, the shepherd was living his life and he noticed that God was showing up for him in some of the same ways he was showing up for his sheep, so he wrote a song about it. I appreciated Callie's reflection with the children, asking them to think about how God has shown up for them this week. That is the essence of this psalm, recognizing that no matter what, God shows up. And 2020 has been full of "no matter what."

The psalm uses two metaphors to describe a personal, even intimate, relationship with God. The first is the comparison of God to a shepherd, which makes the psalmist a sheep. Later in the psalm, God becomes a welcoming host who invited an endangered stranger, not only to a meal, but into his home to stay...forever. That is hospitality! And hospitality was a big deal in the ancient Near East. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a story that teaches us that failing to extend hospitality to strangers has disastrous consequences. Both of these metaphors, God as shepherd and God as host, say the same thing; wherever we are, God is near, protecting, nurturing, inviting, and loving each one of us. We matter to God, in good times and bad.

You've probably been listening to me preach long enough to know that I spend a lot of time talking about what the Bible says human beings should treat

other human beings, the importance of working for justice and what scripture says about God's vision for all of creation. I talk about these things because I believe they are the core of what it means to be a Christian. Christianity should not be reduced to a set of beliefs we all can say "yes" to. It is a way of life, a way of being in the world. Sometimes the way is messy and hard. Sometimes there are forks in the world and neither direction seems very appealing. Sometimes it feels like other ways, other paths, would suit us better.

Because it is sometimes hard work to reflect love into the world; because life is unpredictable and painful, each one of us need relief from time to time. It is in those moments that the imagery and the truth in Psalm 23 provide comfort for your soul. These words can remind us that God shows up, even in the rough spots. They remind us there is a spirit, an energy, that is working, most often through other human beings, for our good and for the good of all of creation, working for wholeness.

I recognize that sometimes it's hard to recognize the ways in which God is showing up; doubt creeps into hearts because we take in the world's chaos. We turn on the news, sign on to social media, or even talk with friends and family and it seems there is something else, something not good, at work in the world. I've seen this best expressed in some sarcastic pearls of wisdom from Facebook, like this:

If 2020 was a pinata, it would be a wasp's nest. (pic of a child batting at a wasp's nest)

Life is a highway. And we can see what 2020 did to it. (pic of a blocked highway)

If 2020 was a pizza. (pic of a pizza with a raw egg and fish on it)

I realize 2020 is a jerk. But I believe we will get through because human beings have been getting through rough times forever. We don't know who wrote Psalm 23. Tradition has attributed it to King David, but the truth is, scholars don't know who wrote it. Based on the contents of the psalm, whoever wrote it, whenever they wrote it, could certainly have related to the dumpster fire that is 2020. Whatever happened that caused the psalmist's soul to be in need of restoration, whatever that dark valley he walked through was, and whoever or whatever his enemies, were, the psalmist was convinced God was present, working for his well-being. That same God is still showing up for us today and still working, through fragile, flawed human beings for the well-being of all of creation.

In the midst of this time of soul-sucking division and fear, in the midst of a moment in history that seems really, really dark, surrounded by our common enemies of hatred, racism, violence, xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, and killer germs, God is present, working in ways we can't always see because we are pretty busy being afraid, angry, or just not paying attention. But that's why I believe God has given us each other, for when you forget about the times God has shown up and when you forget how very much God loves you, I will be here to remind you. And when I forget, I hope you will remind me.

I'm going to be honest. This sermon is not the "smartest" sermon I've ever written. It is not the most thoroughly researched or even the most perfectly worded. But writing it reminded me that sometimes it is okay for each of us to do what we need to do to feel better. And this week, reading Psalm 23 everyday, thinking about it, and reading what other people have written about it, was what I needed to feel better. I needed to be reminded every day that God has been showing up for people for a very long time and God is still showing up today, even when I don't see it. You don't need my permission, but in case you just need to hear the words...Do whatever you need to do to feel better. Eat the lasagna. Reread your favorite book. Binge watch the series. Play with some puppies. Create some art. Or even read Psalm 23. Whatever it is, do it. Feel better. God is showing up...I promise.