



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Out of Control” **Sermon on Psalm 23**

Donovan A. Drake

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Presbyterians are known to do things “decently and in order.” I think it is our way of putting a little control over an out-of-control world. When you come in from the ocean of craziness out there, we immediately hand you a life preserver in the form of a bulletin. Finally, you have control. You can see where you’ve been, where you are, and where you’re going. Check, check, check!

When you leave today, what we should do is hand you another bulletin to remind you of where you’ve been, whose you are, and where you’re going. Since the printing cost on that is too high, what we can do is give you the 23rd Psalm. The best thing you can do is commit it to memory so that, in your out-of-control WORLD, you’ll have an out-of-control WORD. That is to say, you put your life in the hands of the Shepherd.

You heard the choir sing the Psalm beautifully, so now let's say it together. The 23rd Psalm is in your bulletin. Hear the word of God.

Psalm 23

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. What does it mean to have the Lord as your Shepherd? One thing it means is obeying the Shepherd. Before I was ordained, I spent a summer creating videos for Princeton Seminary on life in rural Maine, Leeds, Maine. If you've been to Maine, you've probably been to the Gold Coast. Leeds is not that. The people there, though, are golden.

I interviewed a woman there who came with the name Mary. She had a marvelous Irish lilt. I can still hear her words, "Where God closes the door, God opens a window." Mary was talking about a dark valley of time in her life. And how she prayed and needed light. And how she got a job at the egg packing plant to support her children. And how, while working and walking to the plant every morning, her heart went out to all the people dressed in a way that fit the climate of Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, because that's where they were from. The company brought them up to the plant to work. Hard work for low wages. You know, business.

Here's where the window of God opened up for her. She could tell they were freezing. They didn't have hats, or scarves, or gloves, or mittens. She could see that!

But when the Lord is your shepherd, you must do something, for "He leads you in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." Right paths! Do you know the right path? It's a question that shows up on the final exam. And the answer is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself."

God opens a window. Here's the window: her life suddenly had a holy purpose. Knitting, knitting, knitting, and meeting each new face with a warm embrace that would not let them go. Suddenly, every scarf, every mitten, every hat was a friend.

It was summer when she shared her story with me. She dumped out all her brightly colored creations on a table. Thirty-three years later, and I can still see them as clear as day, all the magnificent colors. Some things last forever. Eternal. "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever and ever."

The Lord is my shepherd! When you say that, you're saying "I'm not in control. I give my life to God. God leads me down the path." Traveling, traveling, traveling. Mark Twain once wrote, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness." Lord knows we need to travel out of our echo chambers, so that we meet our enemies face to face. What good is a protest unless your enemy shows up, too? They don't show up. They're watching a different channel.

The Shepherd will lead you to a table. "He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. What does that mean? You eat and they don't? Maybe! Heaven is so much better if you can see all the folks who didn't make it to the table! And Hell is so much worse, especially if you can see heaven sitting at the table for a feast, and can't get in. A table before my enemy. "I've got the banquet, and you don't! Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah!" But that doesn't sound like the Shepherd. What sounds like the Shepherd is, "People will come from east and west and north and south to be at the table. All are welcome!" That means your enemy, too. "Thou preparest a table in the presence of mine enemies."

I remember Dr. Richard Tuthill. He taught economic geography at Duke University. In his retirement, he taught the OLD Men's Bible Class in Durham. He taught a lesson once about "a table prepared before his enemy."

During World War II, he was recruited by the government, because of his extensive knowledge of the geography of the South Pacific islands, to help in the war effort.

A passionate man, he took his work to heart, and he took the loss of American lives personally. The carnage of American boys. And he developed a deep hatred for the Japanese. That's what war does.

After the war, he became an elder in the church. The pastor there told Richard about a missionary who was coming to teach and preach, and asked Richard to take him into his home. The missionary, of course, was Japanese.

Dr. Tuthill said, "When I found out, I did not want him at my table." He would honor his promise to have him as his guest, but hospitality would take a back seat. When the food was served, his Japanese guest said, "Can you cut my meat?"

It was then that Dr. Tuthill said, "I realized my guest had limited use of his arms due to an injury from the war. I cut the meat up on his plate." The meat of his enemy. His guest stared at his plate. And then Dr. Tuthill said, "I took his fork and stabbed the morsel of meat, and held it up to his lips to feed my enemy.. my enemy... my enemy.... This man, my guest, a child of God. My friend."

You don't have to say, "The Lord is my shepherd." I would advise against it if you like the world as it is. But if you want justice in this world, choose the justice that brings to light the error of ways. Not justice that cuts people off at the knees, but justice that brings repentance. Mercy... "The Lord is my shepherd... Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me."

The word "mercy" brings to mind Daniel Patte. Do you remember Daniel, Professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt? He used to sit right down there while I was preaching. I never looked down there, for fear he'd be holding up a grade. Turned out that justice and mercy always kissed one another with Daniel for me.

Daniel grew up in France. His family was French Huguenot, which meant they were Protestant in a very Catholic country. Minority. Bigotry.

As a boy, he became friends with a Catholic boy, and that lasted until his parents put an end to it, and set him straight on how the Catholics had persecuted the Protestants. "All I knew was that I had lost a friend."

During the war, Daniel's home was occupied by German troops. Young boys who looked like young boys with bright eyes and freckles. When you see the enemy face to face, you can see the freckles.

When the troops left, his home was filled with all his cousins from north, south, east, and west. Cousins who didn't look like the family at all, because as he later found out, they were Jews. His family was hiding Jews.

Daniel said, "My parents did this, not because they were fond of Jews. But, my parents, as Huguenots, could identify with those who were persecuted." Who are the persecuted today? Can you imagine identifying with those who are persecuted?

The Shepherd has wounds. The Lord is my shepherd. The face of the Shepherd shows up in the least likely... who is my neighbor? The one who shows mercy. I always think of Daniel when I hear the word "mercy" because Daniel equated mercy to healing. Lord, have mercy; Lord, have healing on me.

Surely goodness and mercy...shall follow me... You receive the mercy and give the mercy...

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord. What a delightful way to look into the future. Claiming that the future can make the present delightful, too. Because if you know your future, you know that you'll be with the Lord forever and ever, you don't have to fear anything! Your present, your now, your future, is all wrapped up in love. That makes you the most powerful people on the planet. For the Lord is your shepherd... He was the one who first took that path to the cross. He reminds you that there are things worse than death.

Things like hatred. Bigotry. Money for the sake of money. War. Being mean. It's not the Shepherd's way! But he fully believed that you give your life in mercy for the healing of the world. He believed that the one he served was fully of mercy and it always resurrects. The power of love. You believe that don't you? Out-of-control love. Thanks be to God!

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