

## Cross Your Fingers

### Psalm 23

This morning I want us to walk through this marvelous psalm verse by verse, because every single element is important. First, ***The Lord is my shepherd.*** Shepherds tend to their flocks. They protect them from predators and other harm. They feed and care for them. They go to find the stray and bring it back to the fold. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep” [John 10:11]. And so he did.

The mother of a young boy dying of leukemia helped him learn the Twenty-Third Psalm. She had him repeat “The Lord is my shepherd” by counting the five words with his fingers starting with his thumb. His ring finger was “my.” When he got to that word, his mother taught him to hold that finger in his other fist, symbolizing the personal relationship Jesus had with him. When her son died, he was holding his ring finger. He had died in the Shepherd’s arms.

When we live here and now in the Lord and allow the Lord to live in and with us, then we experience deep joy, satisfaction, and the security the sheep know in the presence of the Good Shepherd.

***I shall not want.*** This runs counter to everything society tells us. It is God who satisfies our every essential need. The mass media has convinced us that what were once incredible luxuries are now basic necessities. Psalm 23 tells us that God is the only true necessity. When we affirm that, then we are saying we do not need to worry about our lives. God will provide.

***He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.*** God desires that we rest. “Green pastures” comes from the Hebrew word for “fresh shoots.” Our lives are often frantic, and at times downright chaotic. The Sabbath was instituted by God partially to give us rest. God wants us to lie in lush meadows. We feel guilty when we rest because we are goal and achievement oriented people. We need the delight of quiet time with God.

The Sabbath is not just one hour on Sunday. It is all day long. The Sabbath is a day of rest. We are to worship, yes, but we are not to do on the rest of the Sabbath that which we do the other days of the week. We are not to ply our trades and professions. We are to do on the Sabbath only that which fills and nurtures us. If, for example, gardening is a chore for you, don’t do it on the Sabbath. If, on the other hand, it is joyful for you, then doing it on the Sabbath is good.

A day of rest each week is essential for our mental and physical well-being and balance. If your work requires you to work on Sunday, then take a different day as your Sabbath day. Find a green pasture and lie down in it. We need the delight of quiet time with God.

***He leadeth me beside the still waters.*** The Hebrew word for “lead” means to take to a watering place. God wants us to go to pools of water where we can drink freely and deeply. The drinking metaphor here is spiritual as well as physical. We also drink from the quiet pools of God’s comforting peace and grace.

This verse is meaningful for me because I am attracted to water, sea and otherwise. I am deeply refreshed when I can be by, or on, the ocean. It is also soul-nurturing to just sit by a quiet stream in the mountains.

***He restoreth my soul.*** The Hebrew word for “restore” means “to return, to refresh.” Simply stated, God gives our lives back to us, again and again. He redeems us, claims us, and sets us back on his path.

***He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*** Only changed people can lead changed lives. We are ready for righteous paths when our souls are one with God. The paths are simply following God and doing God’s will for us. “For his name’s sake” means we are attentive to God.

***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.*** This is my favorite verse in Psalm 23. Almost every word in it carries its own importance and so we are going to take some extra time with it.

- The word is **though**, not if. We must face reality. We will have crises in our lives. Life is fragile. The death cited here doesn't just mean physical death. It can also be moral or spiritual death. Life is fragile in so many ways and we will definitely walk into the valley of the shadow of death at various times.
- Then it is **I**, not you or we. David knew adversity. So do we. This is a deeply personal psalm. It is not communal, nor corporate. It speaks to our own individual situation and heart.
- Then it is **walk**, not avoid or run. Some things must be taken in their own time. A loved one dies. You will go through the grief process and it can take a long time. You cannot go around it. If you deny your grief, or try to not deal with it, then it will take a serious toll on your well-being.
- How do we walk? **through** the valley. The last thing God wants us to do is sojourn in the valley, to take up residence there. The crisis must be dealt with and endured. We will do so by the grace of God, and we will pass through the valley, not put down roots in it. If we believe we are continually in the valley, that we are somehow destined to always be in the valley, then we have made the decision to stay there. Such is contrary God's will for us.
- David describes the valley as the **shadow** of death. There is only one thing that can create a shadow, and that is light! There is light at the end of the valley, and when we allow God to lead us through the valley, then we will emerge into sunshine and rainbows. In that is hope.
- Next comes **I will fear no evil: for thou art with me**. As we walk through the valley, if we truly trust God to be with us, then we have nothing to fear. It will be a difficult journey, but God is good all the time and he will never leave us alone in the valley. God will protect us.
- How does God protect? **thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me**. The rod withstands and beats off the external enemy. The staff is the shepherd's crook, used to snatch us from harm's way, protecting us from internal enemies. We will be comforted when we let God take our burdens. Do we give them to him? If we do, do we then pull them back from God? Comfort comes only when we truly give our burdens and ourselves to God without reservation or qualification.

**Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.** God now becomes the host. In the New Testament, the banquet table is a sign of salvation. Jesus promises to eat and drink with us in the heavenly kingdom. The Communion table is representative of the living presence of Christ with us at all times and in all situations. In the face of our enemies, God not only does not abandon us, but provides for our physical and spiritual nourishment.

**Thou anointest my head with oil.** The earliest signs of anointing in the Bible are with Aaron anointing the priests, and then when God had Samuel anoint first Saul, and later David, as kings of Israel. Oil is often related to the gift of the Spirit. When David was anointed by Samuel, we are told that "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him" [1 Samuel 16:13]. We are continually blessed by God in times of peace and especially in times of adversity.

**My cup runneth over.** A full cup was the sign of God's blessings, the sheer joy of knowing God's wonderful grace and tender mercies. It is more than we can even speak of. It cannot be adequately expressed in words. It can only be felt in the heart and soul.

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.** God purses us with all that God has to offer. When we accept God's love and a relationship with him through Jesus Christ, then goodness ensues. And when life gets bumpy, God's mercy is always there to redeem us. It is truly a win-win situation.

When we accept God into our hearts and lives, then **I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever**. It speaks to the now and to the later, the present and to the eternal. Redemption now and salvation, eternal life, are ours. It is a gift given by God with infinite love.

That is the Twenty-Third Psalm. It addresses reality. It faces life and it calls us to place ourselves into God's hands with total trust at the most difficult times of our lives. I want all of us to raise crossed fingers. What does this sign mean? We give it two characterizations. When held behind the back we are tacitly discounting what we are saying. Somehow we believe that the lie or fib we are telling isn't harmful. It gets us off the hook, so to speak. The other meaning, of course, is "Good luck!" We wave it at others to share our good wishes and support for them.

There is another and far more important meaning for crossed fingers. In the days following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, the early Christians used crossed fingers as a sign of the cross, of faith and belief in Jesus. It was a silent communication and witness with one another that said, "Hold fast. Christ is with you. Trust in him."

Psalm 23 faces reality with crossed fingers. As we enter into, and walk through, the valley of the shadow of death at various times in our lives, we do so with fingers crossed – not hoping for good luck, or being in denial of our crisis, but rather as a sign of our faith and trust in our Shepherd Lord, who always walks through the valleys with us. Thanks be to God! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 15 May 2011