

Twin Angels: Goodness and Mercy

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Seattle First Baptist Church

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Our Scripture for this morning is Psalm 23. Please listen to this psalm of assurance as arranged and directed by composer, Bobby McFerrin

The 23rd Psalm

*The Lord is my shepherd, I have all I need
She makes me lie down in green meadows
Beside the still waters she will lead
She restores my soul, she rights my wrongs
She leads me in a path of good things,
And fills my heart with song
Even though I walk through a dark and dreary land,
There is nothing that can shake me,
She has said she will not forsake me, I'm in her hands
She sets a table before me in the presence of my foes
She anoints my head with oil and my cup overflows
Surely, surely goodness and kindness will follow me
All the days of my life
And I will live in her house forever, forever, and ever
Glory be to our mother, and daughter, and to the holy of holies
As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be
World without end, Amen*

Psalm 23 is perhaps the most familiar passage of scripture in the bible. People who never attend church know the 23rd Psalm. People who practice religious traditions other than Christianity and Judaism know the 23rd Psalm. For those of us who **memorize** scripture, this was probably one of the first passages of scripture we memorized. ***The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.***

When I was growing up, after grace was said at the kitchen table and before we could eat, it was required that everyone around the table say a bible verse. We could always count on, Jesus wept being the first verse taken quickly followed by, God is Love. Then the next favorite passage was, the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.

This Psalm is attributed to David. David was a favored king of God's chosen people, yet he started from very humble beginnings. David was a shepherd. Let me add, our holy scriptures speak of women shepherds too. In Genesis, Rachel is a shepherd and in Exodus, Zipporah and her sisters were shepherds. Shepherds care for animals that are vulnerable and at risk from outside forces.

In David's time, shepherding was meaningful work although considered a low status job. It is good to know that folks of low stature in human eyes, are highly favored in God's eyes. Being in-favor with God has nothing to do with the number of degrees one has, or the number of children, or the size of one's 401K. Being in favor with God is about the heart. David had a heart for God.

Royal leaders, kings and queens, were considered shepherds of their people. Their job was to make sure their people had everything they needed to be safe, healthy, and prosperous. So, the writer of this psalm is saying my shepherd is not the king, the government, or the religious leaders. My Shepherd, my caretaker, my trust is in YHWH, the creator of heaven and earth. As followers of the way of Jesus, this is still good news for us today. The Lord is my shepherd and I trust that in God, I will have everything I need.

Saints, we are living in unprecedented times. Our resolve to go where we want; do what we want; be independent, and live life on our terms has been shaken to the core. The anxiety from COVID-19 is real. Everything has changed. Many have already lost jobs, others are working from home, restaurants are closed, gyms and salons are closed, and we are isolated from family and friends.

We are doing our best to manage all this change, but it is tough. With all the precautions that we are taking, there is still no guarantee we can avoid the corona virus and its debilitating symptoms. And, the thought of living this way for the next 2-3 months feels unbearable. We could use a little hope and reassurance right now! Well, this text just might be what we are looking for.

While the 23rd Psalm is mostly heard at funerals, it really is a psalm of encouragement for the living. This psalm assures us that God our Creator will give us what we need by providing food, shelter, community, protection from enemies, and I will add toilet paper which is in short supply today. Amen somebody!

*The Lord is my shepherd, I have all I need
She makes me lie down in green meadows
Beside the still waters she will lead*

In this psalm, David wrote that God would replenish his spirit. He said, **God leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.** In other words, God's reputation is at stake on this one. God's character is on the line. When we trust God as our shepherd and caregiver, God will hold up God's end of the agreement because God's word is true. There is a money back guarantee on this one!

You know for most of us, this is not our first rodeo when it comes to hard times. We have endured pain, spirit-crushing disappointment, premature death of loved ones, divorce, personal illness, and economic catastrophe. When we prayed for relief and thought we couldn't take another step, God picked us up and carried us until we had strength to make it on our own. When we sought God's guidance and protection, She was there for us. God's reputation to care for God's people was on the line back then when we desperately needed God, and God was faithful and brought us through.

In speaking of God's care and protection, Jesus said,

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? (Matthew 6:28-30)

God cares. God cares about our desires, hurts, joys, longings, fears, health. And, God will carry us from one degree of grace to another.

Some of us believe a cosmic energy shift is taking place in the universe today. Every nation is or will be ravaged by the corona virus. We have to work together as siblings in this challenge or we will perish as fools, as Dr. King said. For too long, those of privilege have used their privilege to amass more wealth. Those living on the edge have been neglected, ignored, and scolded for being a nuisance and for demanding a level playing field. The planet was on fire—literally, and so many political leaders thought it was not our problem and said climate change was a trumped-up liberal hoax.

Many of us have been so preoccupied with our own personal agendas of economic advancement, protecting me and mine, that seeking God's presence and Divine wisdom never made it on our radar screen. Well, COVID-19 has changed all that! We now have time—nothing but time. Time to listen **for** the Spirit and time **to** listen to the Spirit. We now have time to think our own thought and read the thoughts of others. God has our attention now. We must pay attention and make plans to act accordingly once this crisis has abated.

Lastly, the writer ends this psalm, with:

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

The late Dr. Samuel B. McKinney frequently spoke of goodness and mercy as twin angels. Whenever God's character is mentioned, goodness and mercy are at hand.

To know and trust God, is to be showered with God's goodness, kindness, steadfast love, and God's mercy. We do not serve a cut and run God. Our God promises to be with us, until the close of the age. That means through good times and bad.

As bad as this COVID challenge has been, there have been more than a few rainbow moments. People are checking on their neighbors. Some of us are hearing from people that we have not talked to in years. They are checking to make sure we are doing OK. Retailers are making room for seniors to shop early with greater safety and with ease. Neighbors are cooking food for those who are isolated and can't get out.

And, I would venture to say, there are some cleaner closets, more organized garages, and a lot more dusting going on now that we have nothing but time on our hands. Those of us who are married, probably haven't spent this much time with our beloveds since we were courting. Hopefully, this is a good thing! We now have time to **really** be with the loved ones we live with. My beloved Renee and I are finishing our third 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. So, there have been some rainbow moments in all this.

The angels—goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. That, my sisters and brothers, is reason to praise God right there. With God leading us beside still waters and leading us in paths of righteousness; and then following us with goodness and mercy, there is no way we can be defeated. God leads and all we have to do is follow. And, just to make sure we stay on course the angels following up with goodness and mercy.

Beloved, we will make it through these challenging days. God has not abandoned us. The way will be bumpy. It may be scary at times, but we are not alone. We will make it home together. The last line of Psalm 23 reads, And I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.

The mention of the Temple was significant for the psalmist. Worshiping together is important. Being able to worship together in our holy place is significant and means

something to us. We are a community in diaspora. Soon we will be together to collectively give witness to God's goodness and mercy. But until then, we will individually celebrate God's assurance in our lives. Don't give up, God will bring us home.

Our closing song while we are apart is: ***Bring Us Home***. This song is one of our Heritage Hymns. Our Heritage Hymns are songs that give witness to our beliefs and help strengthen our faith. This hymn was written by a beloved former pastor of SFBC Rod Romney. Let us join in singing, Bring Us Home.