

All the Days of My Life

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on April 30, 2023

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
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.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*
(Psalm 23, KJV)

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again, Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”
(John 10:1-10, NRSV)

The phone rang, waking me up. It was Easter Sunday morning, 1989, and I was in bed in my room in Barnard Hall, aka “the Barn,” at Vanderbilt. Yawning and rubbing my eyes, I reached up and answered it. It was my Dad on the phone. He was calling to let me know that my grandmother (his mother) had just passed away minutes ago at the Montgomery hospital where she had been for some time.

Her death was not unexpected – she had been struggling with cancer and the doctors had done all they could. As the sun rose, she had been surrounded by elders of our church, praying with her and over her by her bedside, as she slipped the bonds of earth and touched the face of God.

I was dreading getting this news, not just because I loved her very much and would miss her terribly, but also because it took me back to a place, deep in my soul, that I didn't want to go, back to the last time I had lost a grandparent, 11 years before – an event that had shaken me to the core as a nine-year old.

That pain, then, set me on a youthful course of asking tough questions over several years about life and truth and God that led me deeply into the mystery of the Christian faith, and then had me questioning it and running from it, and finally, after much seeking and searching and struggling, back to it again as a college senior, mere weeks before this one fateful Easter morning.

And so, this Day of Resurrection was one I was longing to celebrate, as one that would live up to its name ... as one on which I would be able to sing praise to God with a renewed hope. But then, the call came, and I wondered why this was happening now. Just as I was coming back to the church and to a deeper sense of the reality and presence of God than I had even known before, this was happening – *now*. And the timing held significance in another way too – this was the grandmother whose sister held that Easter Egg Hunt which made for the very *first* memory I had as a child.

I caught a ride to Birmingham, and my Dad picked me up there, and we drove home to Montgomery. There's a lot about the next few days I don't remember, but there's one thing I *do* remember, clearly – being asked by my mentor and friend, my home church's Associate Pastor, Ray Stover to take part in the upcoming funeral service ... to read Psalm 23, my grandmother's favorite scripture. The thought of doing that terrified me – I was afraid that I couldn't get through it – and so, I tried to convince him that I simply wasn't able to, but he urged me, encouraged me, to face that. He knew how hard it would be ... he knew my spiritual journey in childhood and youth as well as anyone could beyond my own parents ... but somehow, he knew that I needed to do it. And in the end, I said yes.

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Yes, it *was* hard. But even in that moment of reading and holding back tears, I had some deep sense of that goodness and mercy ... of how it had followed my grandmother, through her own struggles, in all the days of her life. But also, of how that goodness and mercy had followed *me*

all the days of *my* life so far, from running around with an Easter basket and childlike abandon many years before, through the loss of my granddaddy and what that represented, and what it *started*, all the way to the Easter light breaking into a hospital room merely days before, and to *this* sacred moment, of reading the ancient words of the psalmist, witnessing to the resurrection. We all stood in the midst of an ordinary Montgomery cemetery, and yet, I felt, at the very intersection of time and eternity.

I understood that day – and have come to understand ever more deeply with the passing years – why so many of us will tell one another that Psalm 23 is our favorite scripture of all.

As you may have noticed, so much of our music and liturgy today are connected to this beloved passage. And yet, this is in no way strange *because it is* so beloved, though it *is* true that you're more likely to hear it read and reflected on at a *funeral*, at a *memorial* service, than during a regular Sunday morning service. But it's still not strange all the same, because it speaks as clearly as any other scripture of the essence of the *gospel*, of the good news of the *Lord* who *is* our shepherd, who makes us to lie down in green pastures, who leads us beside the still waters, who restores our souls ... and when we do sojourn in the valley of the shadow of Death, we shall fear no evil, for we are not alone, we are not forgotten. The eternal God remembers who we are and steadfastly remains with us.

Jesus surely cherished those timeless words as we do, for how else could he speak of the Good Shepherd who loves the sheep and lays down his life for them, who calls his own sheep by name and leads them out to pasture:

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.
(John 10:3-4, NRSV)

Did you notice that? The sheep have *names*. And the Lord, the Good Shepherd, knows them and doesn't forget. He knows and cherishes their *stories*, and is with them all along the way.

This truth is expressed so very beautifully in the hymn that will immediately follow this message. It's one with which you may not be familiar, as it is not in our blue Presbyterian hymnal. I first heard it few years ago and fell in love with it, especially the words, because they give voice to this truth of a God who is with us from before we were born, through the joys and sorrows of our lives, and is finally the home to which we are destined to return.

It's often sung at the time of an infant baptism, marking the formal beginning of the Christian journey, though it speaks in the voice of God words directed to *each* of us, at whatever place along the way of life we find ourselves:

*I was there to hear your borning cry, I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized, to see your life unfold.*

*I was there when you were but a child, with a faith to suit you well;
In a blaze of light you wandered off to find where demons dwell.*

*When you heard the wonder of the Word, I was there to cheer you on;
You were raised to praise the living Lord, to whom you now belong.
If you find someone to share your time and you join your hearts as one,
I'll be there to make your verses rhyme from dusk 'till rising sun.*

*In the middle ages of your life, not too old, no longer young,
I'll be there to guide you through the night, complete what I've begun.
When the evening gently closes in, and you shut your weary eyes,
I'll be there, as I have always been, with just one more surprise.*

*I was there to hear your bawling cry, I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized, to see your life unfold.*

My friends, there's more I could say today, but I won't, because the gospel in its purest and most beautiful form is being expressed in *all* we do and say, and sing, this morning. And in this good news, our cups surely "runneth over" and "surely goodness and mercy shall follow [us] all the days of [our lives], and [we] will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Amen.