



This last week – with the bombings and manhunt in Boston, with the explosion in West (Texas) and with earthquakes, at least some people were reading and praying Psalm 23. If you will turn to page 476 in your Book of Common Prayer, let us read together the King James version of this Psalm.

A friend of mine says, when somewhat unusual things happen, “the Holy Spirit is on the move!” This week has been one where, despite the violence, destruction, death – despite the uncertainty, grief and relief, and the myriad of emotions- the Holy Spirit is on the move. After all, the lessons for today were set many years back. They are very appropriate for today as we struggle to make sense of the events of this week.

Why is the Psalm we read so often at funerals placed here on the Fourth Sunday of Easter? Surely we are done with death – after all, Jesus is risen. Jesus has appeared to the women at the tomb and to the disciples. The followers of Jesus are awaiting the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and the sending out into the world to spread the Gospel. So why this Psalm and on this Sunday?

Psalm 23 is known as a psalm – or a song – of trust. Many of us can recite this Psalm from memory although we do not know much else by memory any more.

The images of shepherd and sheep resonate deeply within us even though hardly anyone here has been “up close and personal” with sheep.

We see images of a shepherd as king and leader when the reality by the time of Jesus is that shepherds were usually on the margins of society- not at all persons held up as leaders. Shepherds, by the nature of their work, have to live outside of most of society if they are to find green pastures and still waters for their flock. When we think about ranchers, we tend to associate that life with a rural, fairly isolated, dusty and not necessarily very sophisticated existence. And yet, the image of Jesus as shepherd is one that persists – so much so that today is often called “Good Shepherd” Sunday.

Jesus tells us that he is the Good Shepherd. Using the image of a shepherd, Jesus reminds us that He will pursue the one lost sheep even while 99 others wait. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will lay down his life for his flock, deserving or not.

John Rogers says one reason we find Psalm 23 comforting is that the imagery expresses the “reality behind God’s name.”¹ In Psalm 23 we see God as a shepherd – one who watches over the sheep, one who finds food, drink and a resting place for those under the shepherd’s care. God, as shepherd, is the one who takes up arms in the form of rod and staff, when walking through the valley of the shadow of death. And, one who ensures that recognition as one of God’s own is made known to any enemy in the preparing of a table and in anointing my head with oil. God provides so well that our cup runneth over. God does not give in half measures.

Finally, God in the form of goodness and mercy pursues us all the days of our lives. God cares about us enough to “keep on keeping on” even when we, like sheep, can be stubborn or when we turn away from the truth of God’s love for us as individuals as well as members of a community. And, at the end of our days, we are assured that we will live in the house of the Lord forever. From beginning to end, God as shepherd is with us, caring for us, despite our blindness and our stubbornness.

William Brosend² believes one reason Psalm 23 remains in our individual and collective lives as scripture which is meaningful is that it uses the present tense. Even though this psalm was written more than 2000 years ago, it is still relevant to how we understand God and our relationship with God. God is present whether we are aware of God or not. Surely goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives.

One of my friends sent the following story to me. It offers a view of Psalm 23 and our relationship to and with God. “A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the preacher decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man alone at home, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for the preacher’s visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited. The preacher made himself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, the preacher took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth leaving that one ember all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember’s flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead.

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. The preacher glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave. He slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As the preacher reached the door to leave, his host said with a tear running down his cheek, ‘thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I will be back in church next Sunday.’”

¹ John B. Rogers, *Psalm 23*, in *Feasting on the Word* Year C, Volume 2, 432 (David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

² Id at p. 435.

As we walk forward and the events of this past week begin to recede in our consciousness, let us remember the comfort we find in this Psalm. It does not make the horrors go away. Some will live up close and personal with the ramifications for the rest of their life. In times of sorrow, grief and loss, however, Psalm 23 can be a comfort that God is not distant. Rather, God is present, walking with us through these times.

Psalm 23 reminds us that when we are the coal that has been separated from the fire, God picks us up and puts us back into community if we will let God act in our lives. God will reunite us with those who can help us live with the tragedies and death and violence that surround us.

God pursues us with goodness and mercy. We will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
Amen.