

(Funeral) Sermon (23rd Psalm)

We are gathered to celebrate and give thanks for the life of _____ and to hear what the Lord has to say to us.

“We do not mourn as others do,” writes the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

“We do not mourn as others do who have no hope.”

Hope is an empty word among us. We say, “I hope so,” by which we mean “probably not.” We say “hopefully” and mean “who knows?”

Therefore 1 Peter 1:3 is decisive: “We have a living hope.”

That is what is in front of us now. We have a living hope in the promises read for us. And we add the promises found in the 23rd Psalm.

The 23rd Psalm is full of promises, and as we read the psalm as New Testament Christians, it says what our hope is all about. (We are using the RSV, which here is strongly influenced by the KJV.)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters

He restores my soul

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

I shall 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 my enemies

Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I

It begins: “The Lord.” It’s not “Our Lord” or any Lord or some Lord or lordship in general, but “The Lord.” In the original it’s “Yahweh,” meaning the one who created heaven and earth, the one who made the covenant, Lord of Lords, King of Kings, he is the Lord.

It reads: “The Lord is my shepherd.” That’s personal, individual. It reminds us of the preachers’ story of a shepherd boy who hadn’t much schooling, but he had been taught the first line of the 23rd Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd.” He had been taught to count out the words on the fingers of his left hand; when they found him frozen one day after a blizzard, he was hanging on with his right hand to the fourth finger of his left hand which brings out: “The Lord is **my** shepherd.”

In the original Hebrew there are two nouns: Lord and my shepherd. The second noun means is an action. “The Lord shepherds me.” That is, God does it. The Lord is the one who is active and directly involved with you and me.

“I shall not want.” I shall lack nothing.

Then it goes on in the next two verses with four examples: “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” You’ll recall that the ancient Near East, like today, is a desert land – dry and barren. Thus the importance of “He makes me lie down in green pastures.”

“He leads me beside still waters.” If you look at the footnote, it says: “He leads me beside waters of rest.” It is not only water that is not roaring and could be dangerous, but also that I can rest beside this water.

“He restores my soul.” It’s the King James Version and means: He restores my life.

“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Again the footnote points out that “paths of righteousness” means that he leads me on right paths. Finally, “for his name’s sake,” which means he does it to be true to himself. God’s promises are different from ours. They do not fail.

II

Then comes the difficult verse: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.” It is said in law that hard cases make bad law. But here we have this extreme statement: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” Again there’s a tiny footnote: In the original Hebrew it reads: Even though I walk through the valley of deep darkness. Not only death is included but whenever you or I are trapped, depressed, hopeless, or don’t know what to do or where to go – whatever deep darkness comes, thou art with me.

“Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” And here’s the reason the King James is important; we’ve lost the “thee’s and ‘thou’s. They are 2nd person singular, not some general “you,” but the personal Lord. “Thy rod and thy staff...”

Remember the 46th Psalm, the basis for the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*, where it reads: “Though the waters roar, mountains tremble, the earth should change, the Lord is our refuge and strength;” therefore I will fear no evil for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

This shepherd, the good shepherd, goes in front of his sheep and leads them. In the ancient Near East shepherds didn’t have sheep dogs. They had hunting dogs, but not sheep dogs. The task of the shepherd was to go ahead and lead. He had a staff with a crook so he could lift something out of a crevice. With his rod he could chase away wild animals and other enemies. And the sheep learned to trust and to follow the shepherd. He goes before. There is a double sense to his “going before” us.

The 10th chapter of John tells of the Good Shepherd. It says three times: “I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

How does that happen? Where does that happen?

First of all, he has done this on the cross. In Romans 14:9: “For this reason Christ died and rose again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.” He has done this and established His Lordship.

Second, He also continues now to go before us. In the 8th chapter of Romans, after Paul has summed up the whole of what our faith is all about, he writes in 8:31-32: "What shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"

The answer of course is "Yes."

That recalls the promise in Isaiah 40:31: "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

In the future he is also the Good Shepherd. As Paul writes in Romans 8:37-39: "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That is all very wide sweeping and general and we ask: What about you and me individually?

Isaiah 43:1: "I have called you by name; you are mine."

Ephesians: 1:4: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world."

In Philippians 3:12: "Christ Jesus has made me His own."

This happens when he comes to us and receives us in baptism. And that's why we remember Romans 6:5 at this service: "If we have been united with him in a death like his (referring to baptism), we shall **certainly** be united with him in a resurrection like his."

There is no question in the original about the word "certainly."

We fall apart. We die. In the Large Catechism on Baptism, it states twice: "He snatches us," in spite of ourselves.

As in the hymn, *Rock of Ages*, verse 3 reads: "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to thy cross I cling."

And the hymn, *Our Hope is Built on Nothing Less*, verse 4 reads: We are "clothed in His righteousness alone."

We have in the funeral pall which covers the casket a visual image of how we are "clothed in His righteousness alone."

It doesn't depend on us. It depends on him who never fails and whose promises are always kept.

III

The picture now changes to a banquet, a huge celebration.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows."

You get the picture of a party with darkness all around. In spite of that, right in the middle, a banquet, and it says, "Thou anointest my head with oil..." – which is what one did at times for honored guests.

"My cup overflows...." – meaning, as it says in verse 1, that "I shall not want." – I shall lack nothing. Remember the image in Luke 6:38: "Pressed down, running over."

Finally in the sixth verse: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

"The house" brings to mind that passage we all know in John 14:1-6: "I go to prepare a place for you; in my father's house are many rooms (mansions)..."

There is a place that is prepared for us. We have all kinds of confusion in our minds about that, about pink clouds and harps, about a beautiful isle of somewhere, being thoughts in the mind of God. Not at all.....

I remind you of our basic Christian faith: God in Christ truly became one of us. Truly became human. And he remains human for all eternity so that to be in him means to continue as the truly human beings that we are.

What is that like? Scripture helps sort things out; in 1 Cor 2:9 Paul writes: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has entered into the heart of anyone what God has prepared for those who love him."

As the King James Version puts it in Ephesians 3:20: "Exceedingly abundantly" above all we can ask or think.

That means that heaven is more real, not ethereal and unreal and "spiritual." It's more real. There is life together, forever. There is meaningful, real life together in him and with each other.

Finally, it says "forever."

We return to the tenth chapter of John, the shepherd chapter. In vs 27-29: "My sheep hear my voice; I know them; they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they shall not perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all and no is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

Therefore finally John 14:27: "Peace I leave unto you; my peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled." Amen.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.