

## **Goodness and Mercy**

### **Psalm 23** (KJV) Collective

The Lord is our shepherd; we shall not want.  
God maketh us to lie down in green pastures;  
God leadeth us beside the still water:  
God restoreth our souls:  
God leadeth us in the paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.

Yea, though we walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death,  
we will fear no evil:  
for thou art with us;  
thy rod and thy staff they comfort us.

Thou preparest a table before us  
in the presence of our enemies:  
thou anointest our heads with oil;  
our cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy  
shall follow us all the days of my life:  
and we shall dwell  
in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

## ***Goodness and Mercy***

### *Psalm 23*

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#### **I.**

Along with the 13th chapter of I Corinthians, our sermon text for today, the 23rd Psalm, is probably among the best known in all the Bible, and almost certainly one which is most often recited owing to the comfort it offers to provide. Chances are, if you have been to a wedding you've heard of the faith, hope, and love espoused in I Corinthians 13. If you've been to a funeral or memorial service you almost certainly have heard the Psalmist offer assurance of the abeyance of the fear which evil brings as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Between the two, and in the parlance of our day, my guess would be that the 23rd Psalm has the most "views"; however, it would be a close contest.

#### **II.**

Though I can offer you no hard facts to support the assertion, my vast compendium of firsthand, anecdotal evidence would suggest that with regard to the Corinthian passage, Geoffrey Chaucer was absolutely correct when he remarked in *The Tale of Melibee* that familiarity breeds contempt. I have often seen the eyes of wedding guests begin to roll as I read from I Corinthians. Which is why I always include the caveat that the *bride and groom* selected the text, and that its recounting is not the result of this particular clergy person doing the same old same old.

Conversely, it is my experience that the 23rd Psalm *never* gets old. No matter how many times I have read it, at *hundreds* funerals in 32 years of ministry, it is always received as fresh even in its familiarity. It seems as an overflowing fountain of comfort; both in the reading of it, and in having it read once more. While hope may spring eternal in life, at death the 23rd Psalm allows comfort to spring forth from the promise of the life eternal.

### III.

Having said all of this, today is an occasion for neither nuptials or necrology, but of the celebration of Mothers and those who have been as mothers to us. While something of an incongruent analogy, the handheld mixer might be a powerful and useful tool for the baking of a cake, but it is of little help when it comes to applying the frosting. Different situations require different tools. Or, as in the case of scriptural interpretation, a different perspective. Which is hard to come by when the text is so familiar to so many people.

When we read the 23rd Psalm, it is difficult to separate ourselves from the context in which we most often hear it proclaimed. We tend to get “locked in” to a particular meaning, interpretation, or understanding of scripture based on the time in, and circumstances of, our lives when a particular verse or passage is applied, utilized, or referenced. Though many subscribe to the practice, this is one of the reasons I refrain from memorizing scripture, as its meaning becomes codified and rigid.

### IV.

Whenever we look to scripture for the truth we seek for our lives we must always endeavor to leave behind our assumptions and past associations so that, instead, we might bring fresh eyes, an open mind, and a welcoming heart lest we miss the message that the Spirit would seek to impart. For decades now, I have paid keen attention to the second verse of the 23rd Psalm, “God *maketh* us to lie down in green pastures.” Being settled in green pastures by their associated still waters is not a mere *opportunity* for the rest and refreshment God provides to restore one’s soul, it is a *requirement* for the life of faith.

While I have always found comfort and encouragement in a God who *makes* us to lie down in such a verdant and restorative place, I do not believe I ever fully made the connection to the real world. Until this past week, that is. As I alluded earlier, *context* is the key to understanding.

### V.

Last Sunday afternoon following worship, and after having moderated a Session meeting at the Daily Ridge Presbyterian Church, I drove over to

Canton-Potsdam Hospital to visit Jeremiah and Olivia Sullivan and their eight *hour* old, beautiful daughter, Leah Elizabeth. The opportunity to be with a couple so soon after they have brought a new child of God into this world is among a minister's great privileges. One of which I always try to avail myself.

What a joy, what a miracle, what a manifestation of love and hope is the birth of a child. It humbles one as nothing else can. It is like being in the Garden in the cool of the day and bearing witness to God's creation of the world. Moreover, you can see and understand the love which undergirds every life. The love between parents, the love of a proud papa for baby and partner and, especially, the love a mother has for her child. In all the world, there is nothing more powerful than a mother's love, and it is nearest the love that God has for each one of us.

## **VI.**

Upon my return home from the hospital Linda and I packed up the car and we made the three hour drive to Saratoga Springs where, for the first time in almost two years, Linda and I would be together with our three children at once. Moreover, we would join our new grandson so that all of us would be together as a new family for the first time *ever*. This was also the case for the Melville family who, I believe, were together for the first time as a new family as well earlier that weekend.

For both of our families it was an occasion for much celebration and rejoicing as uncles were able to meet, hold, and adore their new nephew, grandparents could dote, bread was broken, laughter shared, love affirmed, and hope proclaimed. Not to mention an awful lot of photos taken. Of course, the star of the show was 10 week old Alistair whose every sound, smile, and grunt brought delight, and whose rhythm dictated our days.

## **VII.**

Speaking only for myself, by the time you get to be a grandparent you have truly lost the sense of just *how* dictatorial a baby can be. Certainly in the night, but all through the day as well. They become *the* topic of conversation, and center of the collective attention around which everything else revolves. Which is good, and right, and as it should be.

Amidst all of this, and mindful of the text on which I'd be preaching later in the week, I was particularly struck by the challenge of "putting down the baby" for rest; either for a nap or for the night. At 10 weeks of age, young Alistair is in the sweet spot for developing what is known as the Circadian Rhythm: the natural 24-hour cycle that regulates various physical, mental, and behavioral changes. Essentially, it is one's internal clock, influenced by light and dark, that controls things like sleep-wake patterns, hormone release, and body temperature. All of which contribute to when we feel tired and when we feel awake.

## **VIII.**

As any sleep-deprived parent will tell you and about which, I am sure, Olivia and Jeremiah are now being reminded, one of the most important skills infants must develop is the ability to sooth themselves once they have been put down to bed. "Self-Soothing" is the ability for a child to calm themselves down without needing parental assistance so they can receive the rest they require after having been put to bed, or when falling back asleep after waking during the night. It is a developmental process that encourages babies to regulate their own emotions and arousal states which typically begins to emerge when a child is between 3 and 6 months old. While we cannot say for sure what goes on in the mind of a child so young, it must necessarily include learning to remember to relax, the discovering of a sense of inner calm, an awareness of one's own breathing, and the development of a degree of trust that when they wake up all will be well with their world.

## **IX.**

Of course, all of this is greatly helped along by providing a safe and comfortable place for a child to rest, ensuring that they are warm, cozy, and well-fed, and swaddling the child so that they have a tactile sensation that contributes, signals, and encourages a physical, emotional, and mental sense of well-being. For me, all of this has led to a *much* different interpretation of the 23rd Psalm. One which finds a certain "snug as a bug in a rug" quality to this very familiar passage.

Like a parent caring for a new born, God puts us to bed in *making* us to lie down in green pastures and leading us beside the still water so that we might find our rest. Once we are made to lie down, however, we enter a new developmental stage in the journey of faith: to create within ourselves a spiritual self-soothing such that our soul is restored.

## **X.**

One of the challenges of preaching a Mother's Day sermon is finding scripture which references the maternal, as there are very few passages in the biblical canon which overtly speak to being a mother. Interestingly, though, here in the 23rd Psalm I believe we find aspects of God which are both paternal and maternal.

Not to be overly simplistic or reductionist (or too traditional in viewing gender roles) but my experience leads me to understand that while it is often a father's responsibility to warn of the dark valleys we must travel in our lives and afford accompanying rod and staff, the unique role of one's mother, terrestrial *and* celestial, is to assure their children that everything will be ok... no matter the dark valleys. That surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and that we shall dwell in the House of the Lord...forever.

## **XI.**

Just as an infant grows and develops the ability to self-soothe, as people of faith we must similarly grow and develop a faith which allows us to *spiritually* self-sooth. Being made to lie down in green pastures beside the still water is a critical first step, but what do we do once we have been brought to a place in our lives such that our souls might be restored? Answer? To find comfort in the belief that *everything* will be ok.

While I would like to be able give you a more sophisticated answer using a lot of theological gobbledygook, the truth and fact of the matter is that the life of faith is really quite simple. Hard, but simple. Will we or do will not choose to believe that goodness and mercy *shall* follow us all the days of our lives, and that we *will* dwell in the House of the Lord forever? Choosing to have faith that everything will be ok is what allows us the peace of being spiritually snug as beloved bugs in the grace of God's salvific rug.

Today, Mother's Day, I would leave you with the lesson that all moms seek to teach their children: remember to relax, discover a sense of inner calm, be aware of your own breathing, and develop of a degree of trust that when you wake all will be well with your world. Amen.