

Sermon on Psalm 23 by Allison Wehrung, YAV intern for Presbyterian Student Fellowship, delivered 5 April 2011

Psalm 23 is a popular one. I'm guessing that all of you have heard it before, and most of you in all likelihood can say at least a verse or two by heart. It's a Scripture often used during life's harder times--funerals, periods of sickness, and other such challenges. The words of this psalm are without a doubt comforting, but if you ask me there's a lot more to it. There's a journalist in Cleveland that has written a compilation of short essays called *God Never Blinks: 50 Lessons for Life's Little Detours*.<sup>1</sup> Lesson #38 states: "Read the Psalms. No matter what your faith, they cover every human emotion." Part way through her explanation of this lesson, the author writes this. "The book of Psalms addresses every facet of the spiritual journey, the ups and downs, heights the soul ascends, depths to which it falls. The Psalms offer praises as well as curses, consolation and desolation, boasts of strength and cries of weakness. Mostly," she writes, "they make me feel less alone."

While this particular quotation references the book of Psalms in its entirety, it has a whole lot in common with Psalm 23 itself. Listen again to just verses 1-3: 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 right paths for his name's sake.

So...the Lord is my shepherd. What does it really mean to be a shepherd? Of course, shepherds look over their sheep and keep an eye on the flock as a whole. What of the Parable of the Lost Sheep, though? Each of us in the grand scope of things is so small, but this shepherd of ours is willing to risk everything just to make sure each one of us--every individual--is alright. And the shepherd's crook. A shepherd can let his sheep wander a little. The flock can spread out a little, each sheep can try out its own little patch of grass. The sheep can only go so far though, until the shepherd will reach out with his crook and bring them back into the fold. A shepherd is responsible and caring, but a shepherd takes risks for his flock, and sometimes gives his flock the benefit of the doubt. The Lord is our shepherd. *Hopefully*, we shall not want. That's certainly a difficult thing, especially in our particular culture, but the assurance of a protector and guide certainly makes it a little easier.

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<sup>1</sup> *God Never Blinks* is written by Regina Brett.

Now let's talk about "He restores my soul." That sounds pretty nice, doesn't it? Not only is this shepherd of ours going to look after us, God will make sure that our souls are ok too. Actually, not just ok. God will make sure they are restored. Think about how peaceful it is to sit under a tree in park--maybe one with a stream near by. Or picture sitting in the sunshine near the still waters of a little pond. Think about how rejuvenating that is. Now...think about how often you actually *do* that. I'm guessing it's not all that often, yeah? Perhaps that's why God has to *make* us lie down in the green pastures and *lead* us to the still waters. And your pastures and waters might not actually be fields and lakes. Maybe they are! Either way, our shepherd will make sure we get there, and our shepherd will make sure that our souls get the renewal they need.

"He leads me in the right paths for his name's sake." Paths are something I've been surrounded with this year. I have very much been in (and at least for the near future will continue to be in) a place of transition, constantly trying to discern the next step. And figuring out how what I feel called to do fits in with actual, practical life plans. For better or worse, I have become quite comfortable with the idea of "Well, I'll give it a shot and see what happens." Sometimes this thought is in fact accompanied by legitimate logical reasons. Other it has just felt like the right thing to do. Sophomore year at Furman I declared a religion major with little intention of going to seminary...mainly it was because I really enjoying taking religion classes and learning about unfamiliar traditions. Summer after junior year I headed to camp mainly because I liked being outside and thought it would be cool to see God at work in a place like that. Senior year came around and I hadn't a clue what I should do next. Seminary was more comfortable of an idea, but I still wasn't ready to go. So, I figured why not go volunteer somewhere for a year. Having grown up Presbyterian I also figured the YAV program was a logical enough place to start. Nashville sounded fun, and like a good place to be productive while I figured stuff out, so off I went! Though most of you have heard me talk about those parts of my life already, it still catches me off guard the degree to which every one of those steps prepared me for where I am now. Three years ago I would've given a pretty definite "no" to the seminary question. Today I stand here having applied for one more year as a YAV, with every intention of applying for seminary after that. Could I see this far down my path a few years ago? Nope. Do I know what I'll be doing after seminary? Nope. Without a doubt, different paths are right for different people. Lucky for us, our shepherd can keep them all straight.

Verse four of Psalm 23 is where things get a little more intimidating. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.” We have all been in that darkest valley. Each of our darkest valleys is different, but we have all been there. And that fearing no evil part can be really. Really. Hard.

Coming into this year of service I knew there would be challenges. At least I guessed there would be, and everyone at orientation kept talking about how hard this year would be so I figured I was on the right track. Though I didn't doubt the existence of those challenges, I was curious as to what they would be. I figured I would probably enjoy my job (which for the record, has proved true). I figured I would enjoy living in a bigger city than Davidson or Greenville, and that the whole Music City thing would make for some great entertainment. It turns out both of those things worked out as well. I wasn't too worried about moving away from home, since the longest I'd been in Davidson since junior year was probably only a few weeks. And I figured going from Furman to Vandy I wouldn't be experiencing a lot of the culture shock the international YAVs were discussing. What I did not figure, though, is how difficult it would be to be at least seven hours away from almost every one of my good friends. I moved to Nashville and no longer was I living in an apartment complex surrounded by hundreds of people my age many of whom I had known for at least a couple years and people with which I had plenty in common. Gone were classes and different organization meetings in which I could easily meet new people. I can't say I mind the whole no classes deal, but this, in all honestly, has been a lonely year for me. That is not to say I do not value the relationships I have built with my fellow YAVs and other Nashvillians, but deep friendships require time. It takes time to feel like you can really spill your guts to somebody without seeming like that weirdo they just met who just won't be quiet. Granted, I really do feel like I am making some special connections here, and I think genuine serious conversations happen a little more frequently now. But it's April already. Less than four months from now I will be on my way to a new place. Just as soon as I feel as though I have made good friends and built strong relationships, there will be new people and a totally new environment to figure out. Now, I have come to appreciate the idea of wandering a little, and taking some time to figure things out and see new places. Especially while I am at a place in my life in which I *can* do that relatively easily. But I'm scared. Talking about your life's challenges on Skype with someone in a different state can only comfort you so much, and I am scared it will be a while before there are people that I'm that close to that live in the same town. And even if those relationships develop

like they have begun to here, I am scared that I won't be in one place long enough to really enjoy them.

One scholar writes that acknowledging our darkest valleys is essential. The psalmist doesn't say "The Lord is my shepherd, so my whole life is all made of sunshine and rainbows and unicorns." I mean that'd be cool and all, but that's not the way it works. The psalmist continues to walk through those dark valleys, but they are less frightening with the knowledge that the shepherd is there. Maybe it's a little like a kid who's scared to go to sleep at night because of the monsters lurking in the closet or under the bed. Now, this kid isn't *about* to go looking in those places to try and find his or her monsters. But Mom or Dad, knowing that those monsters will in all likelihood not actually harm their child, can brave the dark corners and prove that things will be ok. That is not to deny that those monsters are legitimately scary to the child or to deny that our valleys are dark to us. But when we carry with us the knowledge that our shepherd is looking after us, the monsters under the bed won't be quite as terrifying, and our valleys will be just a little lighter. Our souls will be restored and we will continue on the right paths, making it through the valleys.

The last two verses of our psalm continue "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint 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 my whole life long."

My cup overflows. One Tuesday afternoon serving at Isaiah 58 I met a woman who was also volunteering. In the process of getting ready to serve the meal for the day, we started talking and I got to hear a little of her story. As it turns out, through whatever chain of events, she was homeless for a few years, but went back to school and is now back on her feet working as a cosmetologist. She was so willing to talk about how God is working in her life, and how incredibly blessed we are. Then as we were pouring water and tea, she says: "You know, this is what we can do for others. We're pouring ourselves out, pouring God's love out. We're so full." We. Are. Full. Really, we are. At least I feel like I am. Standing there in a fellowship hall it struck me that something as simple as pouring water or fruit tea can have such a significant meaning. Our cups are truly overflowing and friends, that is a beautiful thing.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” Goodness and mercy shall *follow* me. Interestingly enough, the Hebrew word for “follow” can also be translated to “pursue.” In The Message’s version of Psalm 23, that first part of verse six reads “Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.” It’s lovely enough to be followed by goodness and mercy. But to be chased and pursued by it? That is even better. No matter where we go, or how far we wander, that goodness and mercy will be working overtime to make sure it is keeping up and always right behind us.

Now I want to read the quotation I mentioned earlier one more time, and I want you to think about how Psalm 23 is reflected in it, and in your life.

“The book of Psalms addresses every facet of the spiritual journey, the ups and downs, heights the soul ascends, depths to which it falls. The Psalms offer praises as well as curses, consolation and desolation, boasts of strength and cries of weakness. Mostly they make me feel less alone.”

The heights and depths of our journey through fields and waters and valleys, the praises, curses, strengths and weaknesses of our souls on the path...friends, it’s all there. And it is all God.

Amen.