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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 23
2nd in a series "Take it to God in Prayer"

"Psalm 23"

God our Good Shepherd, call us by name so that we know You, call us to you so that we live by You, call us into the world so that we care, call us to risk so that we trust beyond ourselves. You speak, we listen, and then comes life, life abundant, beyond all that we ask or think. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann)

Last week we began a short sermon series which I'm calling "Take it to God in Prayer". I decided to do this series because people ask me about prayer and they ask me how to pray; but I'm also doing this series because I suspect that for some of you, your green pastures are turning brown; you're living on the edge of the valley or are so deep in it you don't know how to get out. things like health concerns, money; ill family members and friends; the demands of our jobs; worrying about our children, not to mention how busy we all are-are eating our time and literally sucking the energy right out of us. At times like these it's all too easy to put our spiritual lives to the side because there simply isn't enough time for them, and there certainly isn't enough time to go to church or to read our devotions or bibles or books or pray. But it's just at these times when we need God more than ever; that we need to turn to God in prayer. So I'm hopeful that at the end of this series, you'll be praying, because prayer is, in so many ways, the foundation of one's spiritual life. And I truly believe that prayer helps us to feel closer to God and to grow closer to God.

The book of psalms, as you may know, is a prayer book. Last week we began with psalm 1, which serves as the doorway into the psalms that follow. This psalm teaches us that prayer is a way to edge into our relationship with God. When we pray, we're not looking so much at trying to change God's mind, as much as we are trying to change our mindset to that of God's. In other words, we're listening for God as much. When that begins to happen, our minds and our hearts become more curved toward God, if you will, and then we feel closer to God.

Now, I suspect when I say that in prayer we are changing our mindset to that of God's, some of you may wonder to yourselves, "How do I know when my mindset is in tune with God? Because I keep praying, and I'm doing my best to listen for God, but I'm not hearing anything." This is something else I hear quite a bit from people: how do I listen for God?

Well, this is not an easy question to answer, but I'll do my best. And Psalm 23 can help, because above all else, this psalm is about trust. It's about trusting God in the deepest valleys and darkest shadows of life; it's about trusting God in the midst of suffering and confusion; and trusting that God walks with you when danger is present.

And so above all else, this psalm calls us to trust God, because the Lord is our Shepherd.

The idea of trusting God is a familiar theme throughout the Bible. From Abraham to Sarah, to Moses and the Israelites, to Ruth and Naomi and Mary and Joseph, to the disciples and even to Jesus, the Bible says faith is recognizing the voice of our shepherd, and trusting the Shepherd with our lives. Faith means trusting God to walk with you through the valleys, to lead you beside still waters, and to restore your soul.

That is what faith is.

Faith is trust.

For Presbyterians, though, this idea does not come naturally because we are taught, from a young age, that faith can be grasped; that it is (as I've said before, a noun-something to be understood and even analyzed). We are specialists in thinking about faith and religion. When it comes to matters of the head, we outrun and out lap many of our fellow brothers and sisters of the faith. We take seriously the command to love God with our head, but that other part about loving God with our hearts? Well, that's better left to others, we think.

We have founded schools and colleges and seminaries wherever we went, originally so people could read the Bible on their own and think about what they believed. We require ministers-whom we now call *teaching elders*-to spend a lot of time in the classroom, reading and writing and learning and taking exams so we can pass on our knowledge to all of you.

None of which is bad, per se. Knowledge is good. Ignorance is not bliss. And religious ignorance can become downright dangerous, as we see in the recent shootings at the mosque in WI or the arson in Joplin. A person of faith who doesn't stop to think is a dangerous thing.

But at some point in our journeys, we will come to the realization that faith is much more than a noun; that it is a verb, that it needs to be lived and embodied. Because faith is much more than intellectually assenting to a codified set of beliefs, but is about trusting God to be God even when you can't say for certain who God is or what God is doing. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Leaving Church") That's hard stuff, this faith thing, and many people don't quite get there. They either throw the baby out with the bath water if they can't rationalize God in their minds, or they spread as much mortar as they can on their theological brick house to insure that nothing comes loose or, God forbid, falls.

But I've always been one to believe, and was taught, that intellectually assenting to a checklist of beliefs is easy, but trusting God with my life is much harder. Keeping God at arm's length is safe; trusting God with our hearts is risky, because that leaves us vulnerable.

But Psalm 23 invites us into that place, into those places in our lives where we feel defenseless. Psalm 23 pulls no punches; there will be valleys, there will be shadows. The person who wrote this psalm knew all about valleys, and some of you do, too. You've been in it; some of you are currently in it. I've been in them. And if I may say with the most profound theological language I know, they suck. Can I say that in a sermon? Well, I just did. They suck. And when you're in them, you think you're never going to get out of them. When will this end, you think. When will this end?

Sometimes when we're in our valleys, we forget that Jesus had a valley moment. In the Garden of Gethsemene Jesus prayed, "Lord, take this cup from me." Lord, take this cup from me. Jesus wanted out of his valley; he wanted to walk beside green pastures.

But then Jesus prayed, "Not my will be done, but your will." When I was younger, I used to wonder how Jesus could pray in one breath, "Take this cup from me," but in the next breath pray, "Not my will be done, but your will." It wasn't until I walked through my own valleys that I realized that Jesus knew that the only way out of a valley, is to trust God with your life. To literally place your life in God's hands. Only that can bring comfort when the shadows threaten to overwhelm us.

To let go and let God. To trust with all my being, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." But first we have to trust that the Lord is our shepherd. *Change to plural.*

Writing about the darkest time in his life, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells about the death of his fourteen year old son. When his son was three years old, Rabbi Kushner and his wife learned that their son had an incurable condition that would lead to premature death. Thereafter it became desperately important for the rabbi to know whether God was on his side or on the side of the illness (*The Lord is My Shepherd, page 107*). It was at that time that Psalm 23 took on personal significance to him. Only when he began to trust, as the psalmist does, that God was with him, that God's rod and staff comforted him, did he begin to feel that the future would not overwhelm him.

"I turn it over to you, God. I turn it over to you." Sometimes that is the best thing to pray when we're in our valleys.

To use the words of the psalmist:

*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.*

I'd never noticed this before, despite all the times I've recited this psalm, but this is the first time in the psalm the Psalmist talks to God instead of about God. At the beginning of the psalm God is in the head: "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads beside still waters, he restores my soul, he leads me in right paths for his name's sake."

But now, it's personal. God has moved from the head to the heart; From arm's length to here; from intellectual assent to trust. A conversation happens, a relationship grows; this is faith, this is prayer embodied, this is drawing God close enough so that one can hear God.

And so the answer to the question, "Well how do I listen for God?" is best answered with our posture. We need to bring God close enough to hear God, and the only way to do that is to trust God with all our hearts.

If you are walking in the valley or peering over the edge; if your green pasture is beginning to turn brown with the demands of life, or you're so busy you can hardly stop to think; if your spiritual life is running on empty; I encourage you to reflect on the symbol of the cup the Psalmist speaks. What does the psalmist say?

"My cup overflows"

With what do our cups overflow?

The presence of God, even in our deepest valleys and darkest shadows.

Surely goodness of mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Amen.