

## “RESTORING TOV”

--a sermon preached by Terry McGinley April 6, 2025 Dale Heights  
(Genesis 1:1-13 and Psalm 23)

Psalm 23 is one of the more familiar passages from the Bible. “Familiar” can be a two-edged sword though. Knowing the words to Psalm 23 allows us to rely on it at any moment...to remind us of God’s presence in our lives and the way God acts like a shepherd. On the other hand, “familiar” invites us to just repeat the words routinely, without really considering what we’re saying. That’s one of the reasons I chose to read Psalm 23 from Eugene Peterson’s translation called “The Message” this morning. That way, we get to hear different words and, if you can manage to stay awake for a few more minutes, we’ll learn a little bit about some of words in this psalm in the original language. Call it your Hebrew lesson for the day.

So here we go. I’m not sure poetry is supposed to have a topic sentence but, if it does, the first verse of Psalm 23 encapsulates the meaning of the entire psalm. “God, my shepherd! I don’t need a thing.” It couldn’t be any clearer. The writer is directly addressing God, describing the ways that God cares for us, protects us, and leads us in the same relationship as that of a shepherd and his sheep. If the question is, “How well does God take care of us?” The answer is, “I don’t need a thing.” The first verse is a prayer of thanksgiving, an expression of peace and a testimony to the way that God walks with us throughout our lives. Still, I’m grateful that David wrote five more verses to further refine the subject of God’s care because sometimes it’s hard to tell ourselves we don’t need a thing. These words suggest a person who is confident, peaceful...even joyful. But have you ever noticed that life throws a lot of stuff at us? David is able to get through times that are difficult by remembering that God is willing to be right there with him. The psalmist expresses certainly in God’s actions from

the very start. There is no doubt. He knows for a fact God is going to take care of him regardless of what happens. Pretty good advice.

In the time this psalm was written, everyone would have known about the relationship between shepherds and sheep. David himself was a shepherd. Taking a closer look at Psalm 23 has given me a much different understanding of how sheep behave...both positively and negatively. A lot of that understanding comes from why “lush meadows” and “quiet pools” show up in this particular translation. It rains in the Middle East in November and, if you’re lucky, through December and January, and into February, again if you’re lucky. After that, everything turns brown until the following November. And lying down? Sheep will only feel comfortable enough to lie down when there is absolutely no threat evident. In other words, things have to be just right. It’s God who leads us to such “lush meadows”. “Quiet pools” is another sheep oddity I guess. Sheep will not drink from water that is moving. So the only way to get sheep to drink is for their shepherd to find quiet water. I think David included these things to show how God attends to our most basic physical needs...something to eat and something to drink. And it’s not just a patch of grass somewhere. It’s the best grass possible. It’s not just water. It’s water that’s drinkable so it does the sheep some good. Like a shepherd, God finds places for us where we can be refreshed and God provides five-star service in the process! Safety, comfort and nutrition...God takes care of it all!

The words we might better remember are “He restores my soul.” The Message translates it, “True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.” When a sheep realizes it’s lost, it becomes terrified. It crawls under a bush and starts bleating, making a lot of noise. That may be so the shepherd hears the noise and comes after it but that same noise can be heard by a wild animal. The shepherd had better get there first! Even after the shepherd comes to

rescue the poor little thing, the sheep is still frightened. It can't even stand up on its own. You can't pull it. You can't push it. How does the sheep get back? The shepherd hoists the animal onto his shoulders and carries it. Isn't that a wonderful image of God? I can't be the only person here who, as a small child, remembers being hoisted onto his father's shoulders. What a feeling of comfort and security that was! As God takes care of us, we can relive that feeling throughout our lives.

The reference to walking through Death Valley really got me thinking. The average high temperature in Death Valley in July is 116 degrees. The average low is a cool 88 degrees. Average rainfall in July is a whopping seven hundredths of an inch and the last and only measurable snowfall there happened January 29, 1922. They received half an inch! For us, Death Valley is appropriately named. It's a place that is not all that conducive to survival. The temperature extremes make it downright unbearable! But it's a place we can figuratively find ourselves from time to time. Yet even where such danger exists, God finds ways to remind us of God's presence. This feeling was so strong for David that he was able to declare, "You are with me. You make me feel secure."

It's scary to have enemies. We get nervous and uncomfortable when enemies are close. We feel vulnerable. We cannot control what's going to happen and that is textbook uncomfortable. Then something wonderful happens and changes everything. Someone throws us a fancy dinner and serves it to us right in front of our enemies. It helps take the edge off. It makes us feel better. This is God offering us remarkable hospitality. We feel comfortable, rested and we realize how well God is taking care of us. Like a shepherd, God provides whatever we need. My cup overflows. My table overflows. My energy and my spirit are restored. And suddenly, I noticed something about Psalm 23. The way God provides for us increases as the need does. Regular day-

to-day stuff? It's rest in lush meadows near quiet pools of water. When it gets a bit more intense, now it's a way to catch my breath, figure out a plan and get back on track. When forced to go through something I do not want to do, God feels even closer, right beside me. And when I find myself uncomfortably near those trying to hurt me, now it's a six-course meal...the works!

The last verse of Psalm 23 is special and a real eye-opener too. It was there I discovered some Hebrew words I wanted to share with you today. I researched them in the original language because I wondered how Eugene Peterson got from "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me" in the New Revised Standard Version to his words, "Your beauty and love chase after me." I should take the time to apologize in advance for my pronunciation. The fact I have absolutely no training or education in Hebrew is about to become blatantly obvious! There are three Hebrew words in the last verse of Psalm 23 that David used to clarify the kind of relationship God seeks to have with us. The words I found more than interesting are *tov*, *hesed* and *radaph*. *Tov* is a noun that translates as goodness but there's a lot more going on. The Hebrew language is rich with symbolism and added meaning. *Tov* means good, but in the sense of the way something was created to be, working the way it's supposed to, in other words, the way God intended it to be. The same word, *tov*, shows up in the creation story in Genesis that we heard this morning. Every time we hear, "God saw that it was good", it's the word *tov*. Everything was created the way God intended, fulfilling the divine purpose for which it was created. The Hebrew word *hesed* has been called the most important word in the Hebrew scriptures and it just might be. But it's difficult to translate it into English because there's more than one thing going on. No one English word can capture its meaning. Experts far better than I have tried, describing *hesed* as completely undeserved kindness and generosity or

faithful and reliable love. *Hesed* describes not just a feeling but an action. The word means things like lovingkindness, mercy, steadfast love, loyal love and covenant love. In Hebrew, *hesed* is the word that represents God's relationship with the chosen people. It is one of the most fundamental characteristics of God, speaking in particular to the covenant nature of God. The word can be traced back to the time of the Egyptian exile, more than 3,000 years ago. As God was freeing the chosen people from their time of bondage in Egypt, God spoke of a covenant relationship with them. God put it rather simply. "I will be your God. You will be my people." So *hesed* describes the loving commitment of God that exists all the time...no matter what...and in every situation. Nothing is going to stop God from having a covenant relationship with the chosen people. God will continue to hold the people close in any circumstance. *Hesed* love intervenes on behalf of others and comes to their rescue. To bring this word into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because God's love for us is so large, because God cannot stop loving us, because God is faithful to God's covenant no matter what...God's compassion wins. And God's compassion and lovingkindness are going to win in every case. That is a ton of stuff to put into a single word! And that leaves us with the verb...*radaph*. We read "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" in the King James Version. Eugene Peterson more accurately translates this verb as "chases after me, pursues me", with a hint of persistence thrown in for good measure. That's what's being expressed in Psalm 23. God is not just sitting around. God is on the loose, actively seeking a relationship with us. The goodness of the way God created things to be and the covenant love of God are not just following us. They are chasing after us relentlessly. That's a beautiful image...and just a little scary at the same time.

You know when you're in an airplane and getting ready to taxi to the runway the flight attendants share a lot of safety information with passengers? And when they get to the part about if the cabin loses pressure, oxygen masks will drop down in front of you? They tell everyone to secure their own oxygen mask before helping anyone else. I think that advice will help us as we answer God's call to restore *tov*, to return things to the way God intended. After all, we had it. We had *tov* when God created everything. Over and over we hear, "God saw that it was good." Pretty soon, we lost it. But God wants us to partner individually, as a community of faith, even as a presbytery to restore things to the way they were created by God and intended to be.

There is a sequence in which these things must happen. Before we can effectively minister to others, we need to put our own house in order. We need to trust God to lead us, to protect us and to care for us. Too bad that, as we go through life there will be difficult times, grief, anxiety and all the other things life can throw at us. These things would seek to erode our trust in God. It's much easier to see God at work when things are going well. But, every time we come through a difficult situation, every time we find ourselves in Death Valley but we see that God is right there with us, it helps us trust God. We're better able to see God as a leader, a provider, a guide, a counselor and always faithful. It's worth the effort for us to develop the same certainty David did, knowing for sure that God is going to handle anything that comes along.

The best part of the season of Lent is that it invites us to strengthen our relationship with God. That, and it offers us the time we need to do so. As we deepen our relationship with a God who seeks connection with us, even if it's not perfect yet, we are ready to answer God's call to reach out to others, to do our part to restore *tov*, to get the world back to the way God intended it to work. We can become the hands, the feet and the checkbooks of God in working for peace and justice. But

where to start? There are opportunities all around us. The big areas, those places where peace and justice are in very short supply, all make it to the evening news. Conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza and elsewhere. Famine on the African continent. People suffering the effects of climate change. Mental health issues and a lot of other things. These are huge problems. There are people all over the world crying, “I’m hungry. I’m thirsty. I’m tired. I’m anxious. I’m in danger. I’m under attack.” How are we going to restore *toiv* to all these places? It’s going to take a lot of work and, if we cannot go there personally, we can support the people who are working to make those situations better. There is much to do. We just need to begin somewhere. There are things we can do as followers of Christ, as a community of faith and as a presbytery. But, not everything we do has to be a huge step, affect thousands of people, or be splashed across the evening news. I could say small things make a difference but there really are no small things. Whenever we reach out to another human being and try to make their life a little better, a little more peaceful, a little less stressful we are doing good work. And honestly, whenever we do something for another person, regardless of how simple we might think it is, we have no idea how it will affect others.

So-called little things can have great impact. I brought an example with me. A man named Jim walked across the street from his retirement home to a Starbucks coffee shop every afternoon about 2 o’clock. His standard order was a small coffee and a blueberry muffin. He always came alone. It didn’t seem like he had many friends or family. None of Jim’s interactions with employees were very long but they were pleasant and each time, the barista would write a note of encouragement on the cup, hand it to Jim, and say, “See you tomorrow.” One afternoon, it was almost 3 o’clock and Jim hadn’t stopped in yet. When it happened again the next day, one of the

Starbuck's employees went across the street to check. He was saddened to learn that Jim had died. The next morning, one of Jim's family members came into the coffee shop and invited everyone to a memorial service the following day. Those who were able to attend got the surprise of their lives. A few family members and a few friends were there. But to one side, three tables' worth of Starbuck's coffee sleeves with handwritten messages were displayed. Jim had kept every single one of them. A series of seemingly small gestures made a huge difference in Jim's life. So there really are no small efforts. Every time we do something for someone else, every time we choose to be a peacemaker, every time we advocate for justice, every time we reach out to another person to comfort them, encourage them, or just listen to them we are restoring *to*, the goodness in the world just as God intended. I should be clear though, that if you happen to wake up in the middle of the night with the answer to hunger in Africa or a way to end conflict around the world, go for it and do not delay. Until then, know that what you do, even the simplest thing, makes all the difference in the world. A smile, a helping hand, a kind word, any expression of love is a big deal to someone. God calls us to this ministry. When we get tired, God helps us rest, refresh and get back on that path. God is right there with us as we do so. I urge you to embrace the fact that God chases after us. Work in small ways or in any way God calls you. God still wants the best for us. Keep restoring *to*—the goodness that God intended there to be-- and, given enough time, we'll be back where we started! Thanks be to God!