

Easter 4A – April 26, 2026

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

The 23rd Psalm Unbound

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.*



On May 3, 2020, I preached a version of today's sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday... and I am sure you can remember what was going on back then. Always, when I am preparing the final sermon manuscript for publication, I add the place where the sermon was preached... so in 2020, beneath the sermon title "The 23rd Psalm Unbound" were the words "A sermon preached by the Rev. Dianne Andrews, from her living room, for the congregation of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA, during a time of social distancing. Six year later, the echoes of that trying time continue to reverberate. Memories seared into my brain are of lighting candles on my living room mantle and then entering stage right from my kitchen to begin the live-streamed service promptly at 9 am. The congregation in attendance included and my beloved dog Bella and my bed-headed son Cameron who had just pealed his head from his pillow to operate the livestream from his iPad. It was truly strange to speak the words, pray the prayers, and offer a sermon essentially without any congregational response. You know... "The Lord be with you..." *into the silence*... So my message today is going to include some of the experiences of COVID time with the acknowledgement that we were able to persevere through a challenging time, and we will do so again. So, on the fourth Sunday after Easter, in the year 2020, my sermon was a full-on reflection on the 23rd Psalm. Here is how I opened:

Just when we are settling into the Easter season... just as we are basking in resurrection's peace and glory... we are being presented with an aggressive, irritating, subversive and challenging psalm. Sure the 23rd Psalm sounds sweetly comforting: "God makes me to lay down in green pastures, and sit beside still waters... God restores my soul." Just when we are settling into this bucolic, light-dappled scene, just as we are relishing the airy scent of grass and flower... just when we are savoring the feel of cool water slipping down our dry throats... our serene intoxication is interrupted... as we are scooped up and shown that terrifying place known as the "valley of the shadow of death." The sheer walls and plunging depth of an actual valley in the Holy Land probably inspired the psalmist's description of a chilling landscape... in which shadows descend towards the valley floor well before the sundown. A lurking bogeyman inhabits this spiritual geography where fear... in its many forms... resides. Fear dwells most comfortably in this seemingly forsaken place... especially in the fear of death... and maybe even more so... in the absence of hope.

"Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Shepherds use their staffs to keep sheep from wandering off. The crook end of the staff is most often used to catch a leg that will bring a sheep to the ground. The other end of the staff is used to poke, prod, and push... though the straight end of the staff is used... most often... to fend off predators. Shepherds don't just lie around napping to pass the time away. A good shepherd both protects and agitates the flock in order to get them

moving in the direction they need to go. It is too easy... when reciting the 23rd Psalm... to slip into a peaceful stupor while ignoring the psalm's pushy edge. The psalm ends: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all of the days of my life." A closer look at the Hebrew shows that the meaning goes well beyond goodness and mercy "following" us. The English words "pursue" or "chase" ... or even the word "hounding"... come closer to the original Hebrew meaning... surely the God of justice and mercy... the God who guides us through the rough patches of life into calm places of refreshment... this God is the same God who hounds us... relentlessly... with the desire for us to respond and to be in relationship. Our God is one who prods us with the promise of ultimate protection and steadfast love... in the midst of our messy, complicated lives... and even in the presence of death. Our God hounds us onto right paths... paths of justice and salvation... offering a heavenly vision of peace on earth... a vision not yet realized, but a vision that promises to be.

The God... who led the captive Israelites out of Egypt... with Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit... is the same God who continues to hound, guide and direct us even in life's most desperate situations... even when it feels as though we are about to be swallowed up by looming death and loss. The 23rd Psalm was a comfort to my grandmother Fannie as she lay dying from pancreatic cancer... It was a comfort to my friend Donna as she mourned her husband Bill's death... and it is probably the most requested psalm at funerals. The 23rd Psalm is powerful in its ability to move us... both in heart and in mind... that we may lay down our labors and feel God's presence... if but for a brief time.

Let us look a little closer...

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." I shall not want... if but for a fleeting moment. In the knowledge of God's nearness... I shall not want. I shall not be in want of... all of the things that ... I want... and I want them because I don't have them...

I want a happier life.

I want to feel that others care about me.

I want to feel heard and understood.

I want better health, and a stronger body.

I want my loneliness to end.

I want that pesky "To Do" list completed.

I want my stress to disappear.

I want my financial woes resolved.

I want to go on that trip that I cannot afford, even if I am not allowed to travel at the moment...

I want to leave the confines of my home.

I want to die peacefully... in my own bed... on my terms.

I want to feel like I belong... ... and that my life has meaning...

... and maybe, too, I want that shiny new object that has captured my attention

I wantyou fill in the blank _____

It is an all-too-human tendency to seek to sooth our hungers... our feelings of "want"... with acquisitions and visible signs of achievement. When we pray the 23rd Psalm, we are engaging with God in a countercultural activity of letting go of earthly distractions that draw us from the deep peace of God's embrace and promise. The promise is not simply a heavenly reward to be attained after shuffling off this mortal coil. It may be that... during this time of pause... in which the shadow

of death has deepened its reach. It may be that in this time of social isolation and concern for... not only our own well-being, but the well-being of others... it may be that our list of wants may be undergoing a major reordering. It may be that we are becoming more aware of the shepherd's loving presence, prodding, and guidance during this time in-between, this Kairos time full of possibility and opportunity.

The good shepherd promises to protect us from our enemies... but what if the enemy comes from within? What if the enemy is our own apathetic tendencies? What if the enemy is our own pride... pride that seeks to keep us from reconciling broken relationships... keeps us from seeking healing for old wounds and resentments... What if pride and stubborn ego are standing in the way? What if the enemy is a form of comfort that leaves us "far too settled" feeding an unhealthy inability to get up and get going... inertia that keeps us from rolling up our sleeves, getting on with the business of being Christ's servants in the world? The shepherd knows each one of us... thoroughly and completely. God calls us each by name. No secrets can be hid. God knows when we rise up and when we fall. God knows our enemies... especially those beyond our awareness... enemies that seek to tear us down... from within and from without. God pursues us, hounds us, even as we scramble... seeking to flee in fear... because God is present... with us... always... to guide us onto paths of well-being and wholeness... especially when we are prone to wander and stray. Again, and again... God call us to return... to know God's loving, presence... to be healed, to be renewed, to be made whole.

Let us now encounter the 23rd Psalm as if for the first time. I would like to invite you to join in a guided meditation in which we will encounter the psalm afresh. I invite you to join in... in whatever way is most comfortable for you. There are no "shoulds" or "oughts" about this. You may close your eyes, or keep them open. If your mind wanders off... that is OK... God is with you even as you wander... you are always invited to come back to center. You may want to invite your five senses to contribute to this time of meditative prayer... welcoming images... sounds... tastes... smells... and tactile sensations that might arise.... You may prefer not to enter into the psalm prayer. That is OK too.... Now let us take a cleansing breath... in and out... and let us begin...

"The Lord is my shepherd" ... feel the presence of the one who is forever looking out for you, protecting you, caring for you... sometimes catching you, maybe prodding you, even as you seek to wander off. Feel the presence of the one who seeks to guide you into wide open places of healing and renewal. Feel the loving presence...

"I shall not be in want..." I want to invite you to let your list of nagging "wants" show itself... once you recognize your shallow hungers... feel free to release them to God... you are invited to accept the invitation to let God lighten your load...

"God makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters..." Experience this place... feel it... let the details come into focus... the sights... the sounds... the smells.... the texture of blades of grass on your skin, and the feel of firm ground beneath you... bask in the beauty of still water before you... Know that this is a place that you can return to... again... and again... as often as you like.

"God restores my soul..." Feel God's healing love and light working in you. Pay attention to the quality and location of any sensations in your body... listen... pay attention...

“God guides me in right pathways because God calls us to life.” With your mind’s eye... envision before you... a life-giving pathway opening up... a way forward that is illuminated by God’s loving, guiding presence...

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for God art with me...” I invite you to pause in this place... look into the shadows of this deep valley... and feel God’s sure, steady presence with you...

“Thy rod and thy staff, thy comfort me...” The symbol of strength may be, for you, a shepherd’s crook... it may be a cross... it may be a strong hand, or loving arms, ready to catch you when you fall. Feel God’s comforting strength...

“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me...” Can you see the faces of those... in your life... who cause you trouble or grief? God’s generous hospitality invites us to know comfort and nourishment... even when our troubles confront us... We are forever invited to feast at the table of hospitality and graciousness...

“You anoint my head with oil...” Feel the warm touch of a loving hand that marks you as worthy... as deserving. Anointing is the same action that turns commoners into royalty. Feel the touch...

“My cup overflows...” Experience the abundance... there is more than enough... more than enough... more than enough...

“I know, God, that your goodness and mercy and love will hound me all of the days of my life...” I need not run away... I can rest in you... and live in the knowledge of your abiding presence... I can rest in you... now and forever...

I would like to end by reading a modern version of the 23rd Psalm from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*:

GOD, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure. You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing. Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of GOD for the rest of my life.

Amen...