

“A 3000-Year-Old Song Still at the Top of the Charts”

Psalm 23

May 7, 2017

Central Texas Metropolitan Community Church

Although it was written about 3000 years ago, the 23rd Psalm is one of the most popular passages in the Bible. Whether you are Jewish or Christian, whether your political leanings are to the left or to the right, whether you describe yourself as spiritual or religious, at one time or another in your life, you have probably found peace, comfort, and a sense of assurance in this morning’s psalm.

All of the psalms in our Bible were written with musical accompaniment in mind. But none of them have influenced modern music to the degree that the 23rd Psalm has. Its lyrics have made their way into music of all genres: from classical music, like Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Cantata No. 112;” to rock music, such as Pink Floyd’s “Sheep;” even finding its way into thrash metal, such as Megadeth’s “Shadow of Deth.”

And so I believe we do the psalm a disservice unless we are able to hear the underlying musical chords and tones that the composer would have imagined laced throughout the psalm, and unless we are able to sense the rhythm and beat which provides its foundation.

You may not feel you are musical, but that’s not true. All of nature is fraught with music, from the sound of birds with the dawning of each day to the mournful song of whales calling out to each other in the ocean depths. We just need to listen. Whether you are hearing or deaf, you are musical; you feel within your body the pounding bass of thunder and sway to the rhythm of the waves as they rush forward on the seashore and reluctantly recede back into the ocean. Whether you can read music or not, you are musical. All of humanity is musical, says novelist Mitch Albom. “Why else would God have given us a beating heart?” So in the time we have together this morning, I want to explore the 23rd Psalm from a musical perspective.

The psalmist imagines God as a good shepherd insisting that we take our rest in green pastures and leading us to refreshing water, both of which restore our soul. If one were to imagine the psalm’s tempo, we might describe it as “adagio.” Adagio is Italian for “slowly,” and comes from an expression which means “at ease.” If music is marked as adagio, it is to be played slowly and in a leisurely manner.

But here’s what strikes me about this portion of today’s psalm. This sense of ease and leisure doesn’t seem to come naturally. The shepherd must make the sheep lie down and they must be led to water.

I think a lot of us would agree that we also need to be forced to take a break from the dog-eat-dog frenzy of everyday life. In a world where competition is its mainstay, we drive ourselves harder and harder until eventually we drive ourselves into an early grave.

Some of us, many of us, most of us must be forced to rest, to lie down for a while, to drink deeply from the wellspring of God’s grace. I will be doing just that in a few days, but it wasn’t by choice. You see, in order for me to maintain my status as an MCC clergy, I must complete continuing education credit hours. And each year, our denomination requires a portion of those hours to focus on a different topic. This year’s designated topic is “personal spiritual development.” Like many of you, and like the sheep in this morning’s psalm, I must be made to lie down in green pastures. So I will be taking a silent retreat this coming Friday through Sunday.

But you don’t need to reserve a room at a retreat center to find rest and renewal. Wayne Muller offers lots of ways to experience holy rest in his book, entitled “Sabbath.” One way is by finding a candle that holds some beauty or meaning for you. When you have set aside some time – before a meal, or during prayer, meditation, or simply quiet reading – set the candle before you, say a simple prayer or blessing for yourself or someone you love, and light the candle. Take a few mindful breaths. And for just that moment, let the hurry of the world fall away.

Another way to find rest, Muller suggests, is to take a Sabbath walk. For 30 minutes, walk

slowly and silently, preferably outside in nature. Let your senses guide your walk. Pause when drawn to a leaf, a stone, or a color. Don't hurry because there's no place to go. Then when it's time, when the rhythm of being there gives way to the rhythm of moving along, simply move on. When you are called to stop, stop and investigate. When you are called to begin again, move on. There's nothing more to the exercise.

Taking these Sabbath breaks from life allows us to be well rested for whatever the future holds. For as we continue in our psalm, we read that the future is not always a bright one. We can't stay forever beside still waters or resting in green pastures.

And so we sense a change in the tempo of the psalm. It's no longer a leisurely beat, but in fact, it seems to be getting slower, almost like a funeral dirge, as we find ourselves making our way through dark valleys. And so the tempo might be described as "lento," a musical term meaning "slow."

We've all found ourselves slowly and painfully plodding through life with a lento tempo. We trudge through our darkest valleys with barely enough strength to make it one more step. But here's the good news: we're not alone. Regardless of whether we may feel abandoned by God, we're not alone. And if God is by our side, then the psalmist assures us we have nothing to fear: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me." Whether our darkest valley is a potentially terminal illness, a job layoff, the loss of a loved one, or the rejection of our family or friends, God is with us, armed with both a rod to protect us against anything that would try to destroy us and a staff to pull us back to safety. Even if we find ourselves face-to-face with our enemies, we are anointed by God and our cup overflows.

And it's at this point that we sense a shift in the mood of the psalm as it builds to a crescendo of praise and thanksgiving to God, declaring that surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives. But the word "follow" here is better translated as "pursue," a surprising word that is usually used when speaking of enemies intent on overtaking and destroying us. God's goodness and mercy aren't just following us, they are chasing us down. Furthermore, the word "surely" is better translated as "only." So instead of enemies that are in hot pursuit of us, the psalmist proclaims "*only* goodness and mercy will be chasing me down."

In what appears to be its finale, the psalm comes to a close with the words, "I shall dwell in the house of God my whole life long." But once again, some scholars feel there's a better, more accurate word for "dwell," that word being "return." I will continually return to God's presence, my whole life long.

And so it's really not the end of the psalm, after all. The journey hasn't ended, but instead, seeking God's presence is a lifelong endeavor. So we find at the end of the psalm two dots, which in music language means repeat from the beginning.

Rest in green pastures, walk through dark valleys, recognize God's goodness and mercy pursuing you, return to God's presence ... and repeat.

You may want to re-read this morning's psalm when you get home, using the Bible translation that works best for you. Let its words speak to your spirit and let its music weave its way into your innermost being. Try to take time to be still and quiet on a regular basis, because if you do, that rest in God's presence will fortify you when you find yourself in your dark valleys. As much as we would all like to while away our days in green pastures, the rhythm of life insists that we walk through dark valleys. As you do, may you find strength and assurance in a 3000-year-old song that never seems to lose its impact. Amen.