

Psalm 23; Easter 4B; Earth Day; 4/22/18

Pastor Ellen:

The 23rd Psalm is probably **the** most beloved and most well-known Psalms in scripture. It is frequently the scripture passage families choose to be used for funerals of a loved one. It is one of the go-to-texts for connection with God in times of trouble, tragedy and concern. Many people know this Psalm by heart and the first three verses, describing peaceful, pastoral images, seem to provide enormous comfort to people. So, I think it is fitting that on this Earth Day, we are given a scripture passage that describes this beautiful pastoral scene.

Natalie:

We 21st century earth dwellers live in a world of pavement and concrete, a world of hustle and bustle, a world of traffic and long indoor work days. Our waking hours are often filled with stress. On our time off many of us seek refuge, if only for an hour or two, at parks or other places with green pastures and still waters. The imagery of the 23rd Psalm leads us mentally to a place where we can experience earth in its calmer natural state so that we can rest and be restored, sit beside bodies of water, lay in

a pasture of green grass, or walk and play in such places that provide the tranquility of creation. In a sense, this Psalm poetically transports us to the peace and quiet of the Garden of Eden in our minds, to places where we are protected from the din and bustle and hardships of life.

Ellen H:

Psalm 23 serves to bring us closer to God, and to remind us that with God we can know and understand a great measure of peace, that there is something bigger than us, the power of the universe, a power that cares so much for our seemingly little beings, that it desires our tranquility. Indeed, that creating power **intended** such places for us, and will, if we let it, lead us to them. God, the maker of the vast universe, has time and lovingly cares deeply for us. We can actually sense this in the psalm. It creates for the reader of any faith a rare written portal, a thin place of words and images, which can bring us to experience God.

Warren:

It's great to hear and experience in Psalm 23 a closeness to God and be transported to a greater sense of God's presence through it. However, we sell Psalm 23 short if we fail to take time to notice it is also rich with

other meanings and lessons and Godly calls. Psalm 23 can teach us much about God and us and this little place called earth that matters to God in an expansive gigantic universe.

On this Earth Day, we come together and set aside this time to honor, revere and consider this amazing planet, this incredible, abundant, beautiful biosphere that we inhabit. Psalm 23 honors and reveres the earth too. In addition to the call to return in our minds to images of Eden and the great and wonderful connection with God, we can also hear in this Psalm an ode to God's earth . . . creation.

Marla:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. The Hebrew version of that phrase, "*I shall not want*," isn't about our **not** wanting, as modern Americans hear it. That is, it's not about our every desire being fulfilled with God as our shepherd. The Hebrew words translated as "*I shall not want*," are much better translated into modern English as "*I shall lack nothing*." The point is not that we will get everything we ask for or desire, but rather God will provide all that is needed to live securely.

Tammy:

In Psalm 23, *“God as our shepherd”* is meant to imply that we are God’s sheep. That should be obvious. And, the green pastures, that is the healthy earth God leads us to and gives to us, is a tranquil place where we can safely lie. We tend to get that. But what we miss, and what is also meant in this Psalm, is that the green grass is intended to be a place with **enough** food and **clean** air. Sheep eat green, that is, **new** grass. A green pasture is to lambs what a prepared table and overflowing cup is to humans. It’s a banquet of **abundance**. The Psalm’s reference to green pastures needs to be heard as God providing enough air and sustenance, our daily bread, and **guiding us to it**.

Similarly, still waters are not just a healthy place where we can stop to rest and enjoy the water. While still waters are created to be that, we need to also hear that **good** water provides the rest for what a shepherd’s flock **needs** from the earth; **good, clean, safe water**. Sheep drink best from still water, there’s less risk of falling in. When there are still waters, it is also easier for the shepherd to watch the flock and insure the water is clean and calming. And, that same shepherd keeps us on the **right** paths, so we do not get hurt by dangerous things, or hurt ourselves, or others, **or creation**.

Tula:

It's important to note that God leads us to these things, to green pastures and still waters, and to follow on **right** paths. We are to follow. And following a lead requires effort. This Psalm, from an Earth Day perspective, is not about God magically fixing things! You see, shepherds work hard, and they do not bend the natural law to fix what wanton sheep might sully. They also do not do all the work. Shepherds lead, and sheep follow. This Psalm is **not** to be heard as God doing all the work to protect us from our own refusals to follow, or from our actions or inactions which lead us **not** to green pastures or still waters or right paths. When we choose actions or inactions that get us **off** the good path, such actions lead to desecration of the water or pastures or air, and we hurt ourselves, others or creation. When we **do** our part and **follow** the good shepherd, God gives us good things. And God wants us to have them. They are what we need. **But**, we have to do **our** part. If we as sheep show up, get off the good paths and turn the grass brown, or stir the water up with pollution, that is **not** God's doing, and it is **not** what God wants or leads us to.

Cecelia:

Creation is presently in danger and, regardless of whether we think there are catastrophic consequences on the horizon, we need to be worried that we might not be properly tending to the green pastures and still waters and clean air that God wants for us. We need to be concerned that we might not be properly tending to this gift of creation that God has given, one intended for us to be led to and to lead future generations to.

Jack:

Theologically, Earth Day can be understood as a secular reflection of our wanting those poetic images in the 23rd Psalm to be there for us and for posterity in real forms – places we can really go for the tranquility and peace addressed in the Psalm. The Lord is our Shepherd. This Psalm calls us to follow God's lead down paths of righteousness for all creation, and for generations to come. And so, as we reflect this day on God's creation around us and the work that lies before us, we know that in this task we are not alone. We know that God walks with us, that the incarnate Christ joins the earth in groaning for the healing of all creation, and that there is a way out of the dark valley if we can allow ourselves to be led by the trustworthy voice of the Good Shepherd. May we be equipped to

distinguish and heed this voice, one that guides, cajoles, urges us to follow the paths of goodness and mercy. May we recognize the goodness of the earth's complex, beautiful systems and feel mercy for those who suffer disproportionately from the effects of environmental degradation. And, may we have ears to hear the voice of the earth, one that has been speaking all along and desperately needs our attention.