

**“Paths of Righteousness”****Psalm 23****The Rev. Dr. Rob Joy****Grace Church****Columbiana, Ohio****July 18, 2021****8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm raises its head in the lectionary quite often, always soon after Easter and then again, usually in the same year, in the summer that follows. Maybe that’s because it is a comforting, reassuring, helpful, psalm and the lectionary geeks who pick the Bible passages and put them in certain places in the year understand the need of the average person to have regular intervals of the original pastoral comfort granted by God the Divine Shepherd. If you are like me you had to memorize Psalm 23, in the original King James Version, when a child in Sunday School. Why? So the Psalm gets in “in the memory bank” so when the bottom of life falls out, as we know, as adults, it can and does do, it is there ready to remind you of a God who cares about whatever is going on with you, no matter how difficult. It does not take you very long in life to realize you need another foundation more secure than the one this temporary world provides. If you have not memorized it yet, do so today.

When we bring up Psalm 23 there are two problems. The first is that most of us, both church and unchurch, both Millennials and older folks, are so unfamiliar with the world of the psalms, that we might as well be on Mars. How many of us have actually even seen a shepherd? How about if someone at a banquet poured anointing oil on our heads we would feel quite offended, not blessed. “Hey! What are you doing?!” It’s difficult to live in 2021 and make a connection all the way back to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century in a different part of the world. So we often think we know Psalm 23 and we really don’t know it very well at all.

The second problem with Psalm 23 is that everybody thinks they know it so well, they are bored out of their minds when it is brought up. “And now the Old Testament reading: the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm,” the old minister drones on for the 138<sup>th</sup> time in his career. Eyes glaze over. People lose consciousness. How could there be anything in Psalm 23 that could possibly keep our attention? We’ve heard it every funeral, memorial service, and Celebration of Life service, and, as if that wasn’t enough, sometimes on Sunday morning.

Yet, there are some startling nuggets in here, from which we can draw comfort. For one very big thing, there is the amazing, audacious claim that Yahweh, the God of Creation, is not only aware of us little human creatures down here on earth, but is our shepherd and cares for us, watches out for us, and like a good shepherd guarding the lives of the sheep, gives his very life for us! That is an obvious

foreshadowing of the coming of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross! There's lots here, but we'll focus on a phrase that jumped out at me: "He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." Maybe having been lost about 4 times out in a foreign land on pilgrimage, that phrase has special meaning to me, but I suspect we all can identify with what the Psalmist says. Maybe you have been lost walking somewhere, or driving in your car, or on a long trip somewhere, in a strange town.

Out of the times I was lost on the Camino, one time in particular was most stressful. It tested me more than any other time. On one of the other three times I was lost someone yelled out a window at me, "Peregrino!" and aggressively motioned up a different street. Wouldn't want a vagrant like me wandering for long around their neighborhood. Another time I walked about a half mile in a wrong direction, having missed a very vague turnoff from a road onto the Camino trail off into the forest. I had walked a ways, and not seeing a waymark was beginning to doubt myself. But a friend was following and called to me from behind, "Rob! We are lost! We have to go back! We were just following you!" All doubt about being lost was removed. No, the time that was especially trying for me, it was morning, far from a town, maybe 9:00 a.m. and very foggy. No other pilgrims around. The Camino in this section followed remote farm roads and went through fields and short sections of woods. Intersections were everywhere, often without a yellow arrow pointing the way anywhere. So having no solid indication which way to follow I followed my nose, hoping, trusting God would somehow keep me on the right path or get me on it. Oddly, it did not feel like I was lost. It felt like I was right. I walked I know for maybe an hour, 2 or 3 miles over rolling remote foggy farmland, although I saw no farmhouses, or road signs. I was only trying to follow what I thought was the Camino without any sure indication that it was. Suddenly the gravel trail I was on dumped me out onto a gravel road. A small yellow arrow on the side of the road pointed the way I was going. Thank you Lord. Thank you for this yellow arrow!

"He leads me (or I prefer guides me) in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." Sometimes we might find ourselves on a path we are instinctively following that God wanted us on all along. Charles Frazier wrote a novel: *Cold Mountain*. A great illustration from that book tells us about a soldier named Inman who was trying to make his way back home from the horrors of the Civil War. He has been shell-shocked by artillery barrages, ravaged by the war. He lost all sense of hope, even lost his sense of personal identity. As he stumbled along on his long journey back to his farm, he instinctively followed the path of a creek down a hill. Frazier writes: "His eyes kept to the bright thread of water before him. The path it found to make its way to lower ground was as coiled as a hog's bowel."

That might be a phrase unknown to us, and a bit cringe-worthy, but they knew it in the South. Humanity has been on a twisty journey for the last 100 years, and its

been terrible. Through several world wars, and a number of other conflicts and wars involving a host of nations, we have been shell-shocked and ravaged by the bloodiest 100 years in history, not to mention mustard and nerve gassed and irradiated and vaporized by atomic fire. May it never happen again. Not only that but there has been here in the States, the upheaval of our cultural wars. Countless people are stumbling, even staggering along a path as coiled as a hog's bowel. From the conventional religiosity of the 50s (where everybody really had to do the same thing if one was a good citizen), to the revolutionary 60s (where everything, everybody and every rule was questioned), to the me-generation of the 70s (it is, after all about me, isn't it?), to the "Greed-is-good" philosophy of the 80's (which I don't think ever really left), the pluralistic, New Age 90's (have you been to Sedona or the Burning Man Festival?), followed by the crisis filled 00's (9/11/01 will never be forgotten, nor the Great Recession of '08) and the terrorized 10's, to the soul-trying 20s (Is it now about surrendering who we are personally and as a country? I think not. If everyone just gives everyone else the common respect due a fellow human being, respect their rights, and not seek to take advantage of them, it would all go a lot better.) So, we have not come from an easy time and we are not in an easy time. We might feel lost as we search for happiness and fulfillment, as we try to find what seems to be the right way to live with our families and neighbors.

The human problem is that through all this drama and trauma we are trying to find the right direction for life from within ourselves. We might *want* to be on paths of righteousness, but we are relying too much on ourselves to find the way. Only God really knows the way we should go.

The scripture says, "He guides." "He leads." It might seem that the King of the Universe has better things to do than watch after us, but our King and Shepherd has committed to guiding us in life. Life is not a self-guided tour. If you want to live it well, it is a God-guided tour. God has put the seal of the Spirit in our hearts and guiding the developments in our lives. Remember the old hymn, "He leadeth me, O blessed thought! O words with heavenly comfort fraught!" We need this guidance and comfort in a confusing age.

There's another big problem here. It says that God guides "in paths of righteousness," but can tell you, some of the things I've done and you've done and some of the places I've been and some of the places you've been certainly cannot be called "paths of righteousness." I can't believe God led me there. Does God lead us no matter what we do or where we go? What exactly does "he guides in paths of righteousness" mean?

That's not so easy to say. The word "righteousness" here can mean moral righteousness. God leads me to do his moral will, so that I become a righteous person by what I do. Or we could read as though it were one of the Pauline

Epistles. God leads me to find righteousness in Jesus Christ, the righteousness that comes through faith in him. Then this text means that God guides me in the paths of obedience and faith. But that doesn't seem to be what the context is talking about, with its pastoral picture of green pastures, quiet waters, and the valley of the shadow of death. Besides I'm not always obedient, nor is my faith always so strong. David himself had his terrible crisis of immorality and unfaithfulness with Bathsheba. Was that a path of righteousness?

The word "righteousness" can also mean "prosperity and security." Then our text means that God does not let me wander in ways that lead to trouble and ruin. He leads me away from rugged and torturous roads into paths that are smooth and easy. God always leads me into places that are just fine, just right, always the best, right? One morning on the Camino I was leaving Salas and going uphill for 3 hours on the trek to Tineo. It was mostly a very steep, uphill washed out creek-bed, strewn with rocks and roots. If you weren't completely careful and focused with every step it would be easy to badly twist an ankle, or take a fall. It took a lot longer and I didn't get injured. One thing I learned is that some paths to do safely just take longer. But which one of us wants a life filled with treacherous, time-consuming paths? Noone I know. Yet it seems we all get our share of rough and rugged times. None is spared. Does that mean that God has not led us then and there? No. It could be completely God's will that we are in that place for that time. Even though it felt wrong, it may well be exactly where God wants us.

In Exodus 13 Israel begins its wilderness pilgrimage. They were miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt. They were to go and enter the Promised Land, overflowing with milk and honey. Geographically, it wasn't all that far. If you went as the crow flies. But the path God took them on was coiled as a hog's bowel. God guided them, step by difficult step, with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. It was a long way to go and a winding path, sometimes doubling back. Finally, years later God got them where God wanted them to be.

But why was it a wayward path? Why go the long way? Because they had sinned? Not then, but later when the intimidating report of the 10 spies came in. Giants? No way. They could not believe they went all this way only to face giants. So they wanted to go back to Egypt where they had homes and food. They forgot God would clear the way for them. They thought it was all up to them. So they wandered some more, until God finally had them ready.

They were depending all on themselves. Just like many of us modern folks. Like Inman in Cold Mountain, we end up following a path as coiled as a hog's bowel.

Sometimes our twisted paths are caused by our own sin, but not always. When God first led Israel to the Promised Land by the roundabout way, it was not because they had done something wrong, but because they were not yet ready to

conquer the land. They weren't ready to be soldiers of God yet. They had the weapons, so they thought they were ready. But God knew they weren't. They were nothing but slave laborers, who had never been in charge of anything. They needed to learn organization and discipline and trust and obedience. Otherwise, God knew, they would march up into Canaan and get completely beaten by the natives. That would make them doubt God even more. They didn't know all that, but God did.

So, God did what God sometimes does with us. God led them on a path that was right, not straight, a path that would get them there safely, if not easily to their final destination. It would be terribly hard, but it would prepare them to possess and enjoy all that God had waiting for them in the Land of Promise. Their Shepherd King guided them in paths of righteousness, though it didn't seem right to them, even as it so often doesn't seem right to us. The Lord is your Shepherd and he has his reasons, even when the right path seems all wrong.

Finally, the way David ends this verse gives us every reason to trust our Shepherd, even when we can't understand where he is leading us. "He guides us in paths of righteousness *for his name's sake*." God does all this stuff for us for his own sake, for his own glory and honor and reputation. That shouldn't surprise us. After all, the entire universe exists simply to glorify God. That's why it and we are all here. I know that might seem selfish on the surface. But think about that a bit harder. "He guides us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" means that he has a personal stake in our being lead in paths of righteousness, so that we actually do arrive at the Promised Land. It brings honor to God when he blesses us. In Numbers 14 the 10 spies have given their cowardly report. The people have deserted God and mentally they're already on their way back to Egypt. God is angry about that display of ungrateful faithlessness. God threatens to wipe them out. But Moses stands up to God and says in vss. 13-16: "Then the Egyptians will hear about it! And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. If you put these people to death all at one time, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, 'The Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them, so he slaughtered them in the desert.'" And God backed off, because of his honor.

That tells us an awesome thing. God can no sooner lead us the wrong way than God can stop being God. God's glory, his honor, his reputation, his good and holy name are all tied up with our welfare. God has a very personal stake in guiding each one of us on the right path to the Promised Blessing. And if that seems a bit self-centered yet, consider that he was willing to stake the life of his only begotten Son on it. Amen.