

“Meaning-Making”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Psalm 23

¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restorest my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

When I was in Divinity School, one of the courses I took was called “Meaning Making: Thinking Theologically About Ministry Experience.” This class, required of all M.Div. candidates, was to be taken during our first year in conjunction with our first field-education assignment, and it provided an opportunity to reflect and write about our work in local churches. I thought about this classroom experience as I’ve been focusing on things like Payroll Protection Plan loans and what the R_0 number for the coronavirus means for us as a worshiping community. At first, neither of these would seem to be the stuff of God Talk, which is what “theology” roughly means. SBA program guidelines and infectious-disease propagation rates were not things we talked about in class, or in church, in years gone by. But tying these things back to what I do in ministry is. In retrospect, I’m grateful for this class. It helped me to see everything through a theological framework, something that is especially important for us church types in the present moment.

Our church applied for and received a PPP loan, which will help to sustain our ministry over the coming months, and I know that we all believe that First Congregational has a witness and services it needs to offer in these days. Similarly, the R_0 number is something we may not be able to measure ourselves, but we know that lower is better and we want to do our part to slow and stop the spread of the coronavirus and not contribute to its increase, in part because as Christians we are called to care for God’s creation and people. This is what it means to engage in “meaning-making.” We take things, look at them, and ascribe theological meaning to them. Of course, we can do a poor job of it, but that does not mean we should not try.

We all engage in theological meaning-making, in ways large and small, explicit and implicit. On the most cosmic scale, we seek to explain, as the Douglas Adams book put it, “life, the universe, and everything.” On smaller scales, we may seek to understand why someone has turned on us, why a job did not work out, how to just make sense of it all, or, to be more positive, the glory of the natural world, the beauty of the butterfly, the laughter of children.

One of the most powerful examples of meaning-making known to Jews and Christians can be seen in the 23rd Psalm. This text, as much as anything in the ancient world, inspired the imagery in the Gospel lesson we read today from John 10. Without the Hebrew Bible, John’s story of Jesus would have far less meaning for us, for few of us have experience working with sheep.

But the people of Jesus’ day, like those of the Psalmist’s, knew all about shepherds and sheep, how difficult their work was, and what a Good Shepherd meant to his charges.

So the language of the 23rd Psalm resonated for them. But it also carries meaning for us. People throughout the ages have turned to these words for support and comfort during trying or difficult or just plain sad times.

Think of the times you have heard these words recited at a funeral, or at a sick bed.

Think of the times you have said these words because you sought God’s strength and companionship.

Think of these 117 English words, think of the 57 words of the Hebrew version, and then just sit with them. Ask yourself: Why are they so powerful? Is it the language? The associations? The meaning? All of these?

I know that many of us have memorized these words, that we can recite them by heart—and for many of us, the version we have committed to memory is not that of the New Revised Standard Version, the Message, the Common English Bible, or any other contemporary translation, but the old, redoubtable, sublime, beloved text of the King James Version, or Authorized Version, published in 1611.

How was it that a group of English divines and scholars were able to conjure this magisterial translation? What did they know? What did they recognize? The Authorized Version was not the first version of the Bible rendered in English; other translations were already extant. But the men who worked on this project wished not only to produce a version of Scripture in the English tongue. They wanted it to reflect the majesty of the text—and by extension its sponsor, the King and the Anglican Church. And so, while they sought accuracy, they also sought poetry. They intentionally used old words and phrases and carefully wrought cadences to convey gravitas.

We know now that it is possible to produce a more accurate translation. But one more poetic, one that succeeds in conveying the grandeur of Scripture and its God? That is a different matter. We may want a translation that dispenses with the “thees” and the “begats,” but when it comes to the 23rd Psalm, most of us want tradition.

I believe this is, at least in part, because we seek connection to others. When we mourn or seek comfort, we want to be part of something greater than ourselves, to know that the Great Cloud of Witnesses of which Paul spoke is near at hand, and accessible to us.

Perhaps you are familiar with Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of the best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Rabbi Kushner has authored other books over the years, including *The Lord is My Shepherd*, a study of the 23rd Psalm, which came out in 2006.

Kushner writes as a scholar but also as a man of faith. He has lived his life playing by the rules, trying to follow the laws and dictates of his religion. By all accounts he is a good man, a religious man, a man who has made a tremendous difference in the lives of others. But he will tell you that none of this has prevented bad things from happening to him. In particular, there is the Truly Bad Thing he and his wife had to endure—the premature death of their son at the age of 14, a victim of an incurable disease.

As the Kushners grappled with this awful event, Harold turned to Scripture for inspiration, lessons, and comfort. Like so many throughout the ages, he found some of what he needed in the words of the 23rd Psalm.

Before coming to the text as an observant Jew, he came to it as a student of the Bible. He had studied this text long ago, when he did his graduate work on the Psalms. He knew the text, he knew the language, he knew how it had been translated, and he knew its power. He knew that some of the English we take for granted is not capable of conveying what the Hebrew means. But it was one thing to know this academically, and another to know it in the crucible of faith.

Take “leadeth me in the paths of righteousness” as an example. This is good insofar as it goes. What is missing is the sense, found in the Hebrew, of being taken on a wandering, discursive journey that ultimately brings one to one’s destination, of the longest route being the shortest way and the shortest route being the longest. With God, we may not recognize where we are being taken, but as people of faith, we should trust in the Lord, who will not lead us astray.

Or consider “I shall not want.” We know from our own lives that this isn’t quite true, is it? We often want things, don’t we? But we would do well to consider that the English usage of the early seventeenth century was not the same as the present day. Back then, “want” meant “I am in need of something,” which is very different from “I desire that.”

But this is a digression. Let's look at the psalm in its entirety. While it is supposedly by David, we can't say for sure who was its author. What we do know is that our author seemed to be content, that life was treating him well, that God guided him to the right places. And then—bam!—something went wrong. Perhaps a loved one died, or maybe the author experienced a betrayal.

And that was when he walked through the proverbial valley of the shadow of death.

Kushner writes that the Hebrew *tsalmavet*, which is one word, is better rendered as “a valley of deepest darkness” if one wants to be a literalist. But if one wants to convey the meaning, the angst and desperation, then “valley of the shadow of death”—which would be two words, *tsal mavet*—is more evocative, more powerful, and more truthfully reflective of what is going on. I've told you before that one of my professors at Harvard, who worked on the NRSV translation that may be found in our pew racks, told us that his committee had messed up when they rendered “darkest valley.” He recognized the power of the old translation, its ability to convey the deepest meaning of the original Hebrew text.

Who among us has not been in such a valley? We know what is happening here; we can empathize with the author. But what is truly remarkable is that our author is *walking*, he is going through, he is not stopping and giving up. Instead, he endures, and does so with the love and power of God, the God who created him and made him special. Our author knows that God is with him.

Rabbi Kushner wrote early in his book on the 23rd Psalm that “God’s promise was never that life would be fair. God’s promise was that, when we had to confront the unfairness of life, we would not have to do it alone, for He would be with us.”

Who among us wants to be alone, always and irredeemably alone? Even the hermit, the introvert, will seek some contact and at the least knows it is available, that his or her isolation might be ended. Who among us enjoys social distancing? Who among us hasn’t missed dinners and parties and church services and spectator events foregone? Now imagine having to go through the worst that life has to offer alone. That can be a crushing possibility—but Kushner reminds us that the Psalmist has already told us that even in the darkest, bleakest moments of our lives, God will be with us. And in that we might find comfort.

Though Harold Kushner is Jewish, what he writes rings true for us Christians. We may be in the midst of Eastertide, celebrating the resurrected Jesus. But we remember at this time the message of Advent: Emmanuel, “God-with-us.”

We are *never* alone.

God is with us.

That does not mean bad things won't happen to us. No. But it does mean that we will have someone to face our troubles with us, someone to support us, to comfort us, to hold us up. Sometimes, God will make himself known to us through a feeling, a sensation, a stirring. Other times, he will make himself felt through the work of the church, through the calls and care we receive from our brothers and sisters in Christ. The God we know in Jesus will be with us, preserving us and keeping us, that we might live in the house of the Lord forever.

I believe our attachment to this beautiful, treasured psalm has been an act of communal meaning-making. These words struck home when given voice millennia ago, and they have found their target in all of the years that have followed.

When we are struggling, when we are looking for a soothing word, few of us will look to the most accurate translation. Instead, we want familiar rhythms, cadences that resonate, and we look to the psalm that has stood us and our forebears in good stead, that has been a reliable friend, that has been a powerful witness to the love of God. We focus not on the linguistic choices of translation committees, but on the transcendence that helps us to know our Maker.

We are in a moment when some reassurance would be welcome, when we would like to know that everything will be all right. But we don't want a pie-in-the-sky promise, an empty commitment of beautiful words and nothing more. In the 23rd Psalm we hear what we need to hear—not some improbable vision of God making everything okay, but an unshakeable promise that he will bear witness with us, that we will not be alone. It is a promise that as we travel through our current shadowed way, the love and life we know in Jesus Christ will be a light showing us the road forward, a path on which we will together make meaning and, in the process, better understand what God has done and is doing in our lives.