

New Treasure From Old Places

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 23

In his book *150*, Kevin Adams tells a story of a time when he was asked to do a funeral for a woman who had never been part of a church. She and her husband were children of the 60's. Neither of them had ever been very religious. They'd met, they'd bonded over Beatles music and hippy culture, they'd married and lived in a happy marriage for 40 years. Now the wife had terminal cancer and they were completely unequipped to face her mortality. Desperate, they turned to a pastor in a nearby church, Kevin Adams, and asked if he could do the funeral. He said ok and met with them to plan her service. Adams said they were a nice couple, tearful, and genuinely spiritually hungry in the face of death. But they had no idea about how to approach a funeral. He asked about what sort of thing they might like for the service. They had no idea. He asked about songs or hymns they might enjoy - again, no idea. He asked about a Bible passage...they looked stumped again and Reverend Adams was about to move on when the woman said, "What about that one passage with the green pastures?" "Do you mean the Lord is my Shepherd?" said Adams. "Yes," said the woman, glad to know a real Bible verse, "That's the one. Let's put that one in. I like that one." Such is the power of Psalm 23. This is such a popular psalm, and there is so much comfort in it, that even people living in the self-imposed desert of unbelief are watered by its promises. These people had made a conscious effort to live apart from God and somehow these words manage to find them and whisper a little hope in their ear.

Of course, if you are a Christian, if you are one of those people trying to live close to God's word, the popularity of this Psalm has another side to it. We've heard it so often, we've read it so often, we've heard so many sermons on it, and we wonder if it has anything else to teach us. When you grow up in the church, you can be forgiven for opening up your evening bulletin and saying, "Psalm 23! Do we really need another sermon on Psalm 23!?" Well, need it or not, you're going to get it. You might think you know everything there is to know about this psalm, but tonight I hope to prove you wrong. Tonight, as the sermon title suggests, we will find new treasure in old places. I would like to lift up three details from this Psalm that will show you different facets of the Good Shepherd's love for us. To show these new facets of God's love I want to hold up for you, the preposition, the pronouns and the verb. All the grammar nerds here are super-excited; the rest of you are having flashbacks to the horrors of sixth grade English. Nevertheless, that's how we will arrange things. The preposition, the pronouns and the verb.

First the preposition. According to Hebrew scholar James Limburg if you count the words of Psalm 23 in the Hebrew, there is an important word right at the center of this poem. That word is a preposition. I went back to the Hebrew and did the count myself, and sure enough, if you count it in a certain way, there's the preposition, right in the middle. The fulcrum of the Psalm. In the Hebrew that word is *immadi*. In our Bible it's translated as 'with me.' In Hebrew the preposition and the object of the preposition are often smushed together in one word, and that word is with me. "You are with me." How fitting that this should be the central word of the poem, because it is also the central idea of the Psalm. David wants everyone to know that wherever we are, God is with us. Whether we are by green pastures or walking in the valley of the shadow, the Lord is with us. Whether we are by quiet waters or in the presence of our enemies, The Lord is with us. You can take this one step further. If 'with me' is the middle word of the poem, what's the first word of the poem? Yahweh. The Lord. What's the last word of the poem? Yammim. Forever. Put the beginning middle and the end together and what do you get? "The Lord...with me...forever."

You are with me. It's not just the central word of this poem; it's the central hope of our lives. James Limburg tells the story of a time when he went for a bike ride with his young son. The boy had just got his first ten-speed bike, so Father and son decided to go on a little bike ride along a bike path by their town. At one point on the ride, they went by a drainage ditch, a big concrete tunnel that went under the interstate highway. Feeling adventurous, they decided to explore the tunnel. It was a little claustrophobic. Limburg couldn't stand up straight and there was enough room for them to stand side by side, but no more. They walked for a little distance when suddenly the tunnel took a sharp turn and after the turn it suddenly became completely dark.

They could see nothing. In the dark Limburg felt a hand reach out and take his. The son took the Father's hand, and together they walked forward into the pitch dark. Eventually, the tunnel took another turn and the other end of the tunnel came into view. At that point, the son let go. "*When I walk through the valley of the shadow, you are with me.*" It's the central word of this Psalm, it's the central hope of every day of our lives. It's also the central hope of that very last day, when we will enter a scary, unfamiliar tunnel that will take a sudden turn into complete darkness. There too the Lord will take our hand and lead us to the light. Whatever tunnel you are in, the Lord is with you.

That's the preposition, now for the pronouns. Have you ever noticed that the pronouns change in Psalm 23? At the beginning of the psalm, it's all 'he.' David says, he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. But then, in verse 4 it changes. You are with me. You set a table for me. You anoint my head with oil. What's going on? At the beginning of the Psalm David is talking about God. At the end of the Psalm he's talking to God. The Psalm moves from language of general observation about the Shepherd, to expressions of personal relationship with and dependency on the shepherd. Did you notice where the change happened? The change happened in the valley. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, YOU are with me. It's in the valley that the psalmist changed from talking about God to talking to him. There is something existentially honest about this. When life is going well, when we are in our green pasture and quiet water times we are more likely to talk about God, to get into speculative discussions about who he is and what he does.

"Why does God allow suffering in this world?"

"Oooo! Good question. I like Alvin Plantinga's free will argument: God allows suffering as the price of freedom."

"Although in the problem of pain C.S. Lewis leans toward suffering as formation: God allows suffering as a way to disciple us".

"Hmm. Yes. Interesting."

It's fine to talk like this. Theology is important. But when you are in the valley of suffering, when the waves are crashing over you, you switch from the third person to the second. "Save me Lord for the waters have come up to my neck! Lord You are my hope! Lord You have been my dwelling place for all generations. I need you Lord." Think of the tunnel story again. When did James Limburg's boy grab his hand? When did it become most personal? When things were at their darkest. When things were at their darkest, they became most personal. When we are in the valley, all our 'hes' turn to 'yous'. And God promises that he is there with us in that valley.

The preposition, the pronoun and now the verb. The verb I'm thinking of is in the very last verse of the Psalm. '*Surely goodness and mercy (or as our translation has it, surely goodness and love) will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*' That's how we've heard that verse translated our whole life. But recently, thanks to a member of this congregation, I've seen a new side of that verse. In the Hebrew the word 'follow' is the verb *radaph*. And while *radaph* can be translated as follow, the dominant meaning of the word is a little stronger than that. Usually *radaph* is translated as to pursue, to chase, to hunt. So, for example, when Exodus 14 tells us that the Pharaoh and the Egyptians got in their chariots to pursue the Israelites after they left Egypt, the verb is *radaph*. They didn't just follow Israel, they chased them. In Judges 7 after Gideon scattered the Midianites by blowing trumpets and smashing the jugs, the armies of Israel pursued the Midianites. That's *radaph* too. They didn't just follow Midian like you follow when you play follow the leader; they chased them down. If you were announcing a football game in Ancient Israel and you were trying to describe the way a linebacker chased down a running back, or the way a defensive end chased a quarterback, *radaph* would be the verb you would use. Some form of the verb *radaph* occurs 144 times in the Old Testament and the vast majority of those times it has the sense of to chase, to hunt, to pursue.

With that in mind, listen to verse 6 again: *Surely goodness and mercy will chase me all the days of my life.* Surely goodness and love will pursue me all the days of my life. Surely goodness and mercy will hunt me down. It's an unusual picture that it forms in your mind - being hunted down by love and goodness - but it's a fitting picture. Because God's love does not simply follow his children, trailing behind at a distance; it pursues us. Adam and Eve flee from him in the garden and he pursues them. Israel wanders from his ways and he sends prophet after prophet after prophet. He pursues them. The whole of humanity forgets his name and his ways,

he sends his only Son to the world. He pursues us. Our loved ones die and descend to a place where we can't reach them, God sends his son down into the place of death to pursue them, so that we can all dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Hear again, hear afresh, the promise of God! Goodness and love will pursue you. God's love will find you. Goodness and mercy will hunt you down and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I love the deeper meaning of that verb and the picture it paints. I love how it makes the whole psalm a little more fierce. I love it because it knows that sometimes I need love and goodness to chase me down. I get lost in my worries about life, my worries about church, and my worries about the state of the country. I find myself grouchy and distracted - visions of catastrophe playing in my head. I go to a bad place. It's good to know that in that bad place, Goodness and mercy will hunt me down and find me. I also love this because it gives me good strong hope for all the many, many wanderers out there. We all know people, good people who were baptized, who were named children of God, but who have either wandered or fled from this community. Sometimes they are our friends, sometimes they are our siblings, sometimes they are our friends. We worry about them. A lot. We pray for these folk. A lot. In verse 6, because of that verb, I have hope that God is way ahead of my prayer. I have hope that the goodness and mercy of the Lord will hunt these folk down and bring them home so that they will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Thanks be to God for the promise of his word – every preposition, every pronoun, every verb.

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