

**OPENER:**

Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, if you were playing basketball, it was only with considerable confidence that one would choose the number 23 to wear in a game. That particular number was Michael Jordan's and so to choose to wear "23" was to claim his greatness.

To give you an idea of the religious significance that some folks place on that number, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina where Jordan went to college, there is an establishment with the curious name "He is not here"—derived from fans calling in to see if the great #23 was present, to which the staff answered "He is not Here." "He is not here" of course is also the great Easter acclamation of the empty tomb, uttered by the angel as the women were coming to look for Jesus' body on that first Easter morning.<sup>1</sup>

**TWO STORIES**

It's only by happenstance, though, that Psalm 23, the most famous of all the Psalms, has "Twenty Three" as its identifier. The numeric titles given to each Psalm are not in the text itself but rather are a guess about how they are to be divided. Regardless, Psalm 23 is probably the most quoted Psalm, maybe the most quoted part of the Old Testament, and a contender for the most beloved passage of all the Bible.

However, it was not always so beloved. This Psalm is about 3000 years old but only relatively recently, in the last 150 years, has it become this go-to Bible verse.

The circumstances that catapulted the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm into its fame are interesting and they mirror in some ways the story of our own Church of the Good Shepherd, which we celebrate today on Good Shepherd Sunday.

This morning I would like to try to tie those two stories together, relating how this Psalm and this Church rose in prominence—with, of course, an eye on how we and this glorious psalm will continue to tell our story into the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28.5.

## **PSALM 23 History:**

First Psalm 23. Let's rewind to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States, still largely an agrarian nation, is right on the cusp of industrialization and the rapid cultural, economic, and social transformations that that would entail. Some were worried, including religious-minded folk, that people were already starting to forget what pastoral life was like. So a famous clergy person by the name of Henry Beecher wrote a meditation on Psalm 23. It read, in part:

*The twenty-third psalm is the nightingale of the psalms. It is small, of a homely feather, singing shyly out of obscurity; but, O, it has filled the air of the whole world with melodious joy, greater than the heart can conceive. It will go singing to your children and my children, and to their children, through all the generations of time; nor will it fold its wings till the last pilgrim is safe, and time ended; and then it shall fly back to the bosom of God, whence it issued, and sound on, mingled with all those sounds of celestial joy which make heaven musical forever.<sup>2</sup>*

Beecher's advocacy struck a chord with the country and people started to cherish the Psalm in a new way. And, to a country coming out of the American Civil War, where the "shadow of death" was all too real, this Psalm seemed to describe both the depths of despair and the hoped-for reconciliation in the post-war period.

In the ensuing decades, it became well-read particularly at funerals. Now, one can hardly believe it was not in our prayer book in the Burial Office until 1928. But, in the same way that Paul's "Hymn to Love" from Corinthians has come to be identified with weddings although it was not intended for that, Psalm 23 is a fixture at funeral where even secular congregants know and love it.

## **PSALM 23- Text**

There is just something about this Psalm that cuts to the core with people, regardless of their religious denomination or affiliation.

It has been put to music in hymnody, used in films, and stitched in needlepoint in countless bed pillows.

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Ward Beecher "The Singing Pilgrim." Quoted in <https://www.churchoftheservantcrc.org/liturgy-lesson-psalm-23/>

I think the reason is that it is so powerful is that takes us through all of life in those six short verses, through the valley of death and into the land of plenty.

And, of course, maybe it's also become more and more popular because our culture and society have become more and more industrialized, less and less agrarian. We are so far removed from even the American of Beecher and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet we still long for those images, we still long for the Shepherd.

### **GOOD SHEPHERD CHURCH:**

That brings us to the other part of our story, the Church of the Good Shepherd. Since we are not named after a saint, this is our Feast Day, a birthday of sorts. The story of this Good Shepherd began during that same time period that the Psalm 23 started to gain in popularity. Maybe there is indeed a connection of how we got our name?

We started certainly as a country church at the "old church" down the road almost 150 years ago. Burke and Braddock Road and Fairfax County were just acres upon acres of Farmland back then. We were just "green pastures" and "still waters" until relatively recently

Things were not perfect, of course, if you go downstairs and look at the vestry minutes, in the very first entries, they are worried about money, about pledging, about building maintenance, about snakes and rats in the sanctuary even.

Then, in the last century, suburbanization struck with a force and vigor of Biblical proportions. The Church of the Good Shepherd expanded along with Fairfax County, moving down and across the road to here.

Through all of it, I liked to think of how many times Psalm 23 been said for different occasions and reasons by this community.

It's fitting that Christine insisted that we hear Psalm 23 in the King James Version, which itself sends us back in time and back to earlier in our lives.

To read it in the newer translations, which are technically more accurate and more sensitive, would be weird. It would be like seeing Michael Jordan wear number "45" which he did in his career. Something is not quite right.

## CONCLUSION

That having been said, our challenge is to hear it fresh and anew. I want to close by highlighting two things about this Psalm.

First, the Psalmist is always speaking in the present tense. So, while acknowledging its role at funeral and in hospitals, it's a Psalm for how live our lives in the present. And so every time you say, you start in need, in want, you go down into the valley. You always have to face down the evil of *this* age.

Psalm 23 allows us to confront the present, to understand how we are to live into God's future, where we know we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Second, in that effort, we don't need to "get to God" in any way. My favorite aspect is the incredible shift in the middle of Psalm where the author goes from referring to God in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person "He maketh me lie down in green pasture" to the 2<sup>nd</sup> person, "you are with me."<sup>3</sup>

Almost mid-sentence, the author shifts because he realizes that God is right there, right there in our midst. Since it's awkward to talk about someone in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person when they are right there, the author acknowledges God as right there. Our mission, regardless of the time and place, of the building, of the setting, and of the larger context, is to ask: "How do we continue to know the Shepherd?" It is comforting to know that that question was made when we were a rural church, as a suburban church and now as we enter this Post-Christendom age, this digital frontier.

In all those time and places, we know that this is a God of the present, and a God that as a Good Shepherd is right there with us, "leading us toward himself, following us in our wanderings and never letting us go."<sup>4</sup> **AMEN**

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, "Clown in the Belfry." In *Secrets in the Dark*, 128.

<sup>4</sup> John B. Rogers. "Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. 434.