**
15th October 2023
Psalm 23
Philippians 4.4-9

 The Spirituality of Vulnerability**

**Introduction to the theme**: *Who knew 60 would be so much fun!*

 A few weeks ago my middle brother turned 60. Reaching a birthday with a zero in it sometimes catches us out and I think, just like me a few years before, Jeff couldn’t quite believe he had completed six decades and was now about to enter his seventh.

So, imagine our amusement the other Sunday evening when Steve, his younger brother, and I, his older, received this message from him: *What is happening, we are watching Countryfile with the Sheep Dog Competition and loving it. Who knew being 60 would be this much fun!*’

Well, I wrote back, wishing him well and hoping he would enjoy his Ovaltine later that evening.

Perhaps, as we get older, we do develop a growing respect for countryside and those who work with ancient skills such as shepherding and sheep dog training.

Today’s set Psalm is all about God as shepherd.

Psalm 23 is much loved, whether it’s sung to Crimond, Brother James’ Air, or the beautiful Vicar of Dibley theme tune by Howard Goodall.

It’s also a well-known Psalm. Yet I confess it always confused me when growing up as I thought it was rather ungrateful to say *The Lord is my Shepherd that I shall not want.*When you are genuinely confused by the language as an 11 year old, it’s rather embarrassing when the penny actually dropped when I was 12 as to what the Psalm was really saying.

Walter Brueggemann, now aged 90, has been one of the most outstanding Old Testament scholars of his generation. He’s best known to some of us for his New Testament paraphrase *The Message.* But the Psalms are really his speciality, and this is how he's paraphrased this one. It jolts us a bit as we divert from the lilting familiarity of the King James’ version, but that’s no bad thing; this is how it goes:

*God, my shepherd! I don’t need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows;
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word, you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.
Even when the way goes through Death Valley,
I’m not afraid when you walk by my side.
Your trusty shepherd’s crook makes me feel secure.
You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.
Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I’m back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.*Perhaps one of the things we easily miss about this Psalm is that it’s written, as it were, from the sheep’s point of view. And sheep are essentially highly dependent creatures. To enter into the world of Psalm 23 is to enter The Spirituality of Vulnerability.

So, in an age that often has so much to say about self-help and one that celebrates self-reliance, the Shepherd’s Psalm this morning will ask us: When times are tough and when it feels like we may be running on empty, where do we turn, and who do we look to?

Sermon: The Spirituality of Vulnerability

*Gracious God, we open the bible and long to receive your word.
Open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all
its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.*

About a year ago I sat, as a guest, in a synagogue attending the weekly Eve of Shabat service one Friday night. So much felt both familiar and yet unfamiliar, all at the same time. However, I found that one of the most comforting moments came as the Psalms were read. Psalms are pearls of Jewish poetry that we Christians have taken to our hearts.

Indeed, Jesus would have known, and we sense, loved the Psalms.

Upon the cross he quotes from Psalm 22 when he cries out in anguish *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.*Psalm 22 is what is known as a Psalm of Lament. A Song of Protest, if you like. Times to be up front and honest with God about how tough we might be finding life. Of course, this was especially true in the Jewish story when the nation was so often invaded and taken into captivity and exile.

So, rather than pretend that everything is fine, Psalms of Lament say it’s OK to be honest with God, to cry out, ask questions and express doubts.

In many ways the questions asked in the 22nd Psalm are answered in the 23rd. They balance each other as if saying to us that sometimes the best insights can only emerge once the hardest issues are honestly faced.

Psalms 22 and 23, in a way they belong together, they are rather like two sides of the one coin we call faith, whose currency is so valuable because it contains both questions and trust.

A shepherd’s life in ancient Israel was far from the pastoral idyl that has, perhaps, been falsely fixed in our minds by a superficial reading of this Psalm.

We tend to concentrate on the end picture of Psalm 23, the image of sheep lying down in green pasture by running water. It sounds like something out of Thomas Hardy’s mythical mid-Victorian Dorset. Yet the reality is that both green pasture and running water were in short supply in the land of the Psalms. It rarely rains in parts of Israel during the summer months, and even in winter it may be no more than four to six inches a year. Being a shepherd was a busy and demanding job with a good shepherd constantly searching for good pasture and drinkable water. This was a semi-nomadic life, always seeking safety in a hostile environment. So much work had to be done by the shepherd before that end picture of Psalm 23, of sheep happily drinking and munching, could be painted.

Psalm 23 is what we call an *Individual Psalm,* that is it’s a person’s reflection on how God provided a way for them through a certain difficulty or challenge. This type of Psalm celebrates the *alongside-ness* of God. A God who provides and in whom we find a different sort of strength to self-sufficiency alone.

Now, any minister will tell you that this is a much-loved Psalm that is often sung or said at funerals. It brings comfort and hope. And maybe that is because of that reference, especially in the King James’ version of the bible that many grew up with, in verse four to *the valley of the shadow of death* and in verse 6 of *dwelling in the house of the Lord for ever.*Newer versions emphasise that the valley isn’t death itself but a time of deep darkness, and that dwelling in the house of the Lord is code for living a life right now, in the here and present that is grateful for and conscious of the presence of God.

Psalm 23, of course, knows a thing or two about human tenacity and resilience, after all its core imagery is a stubbornly determined shepherd, out in all weather, constantly facing and stepping up to fresh challenges, one who through sheer hard work brings his flock to running streams and green pastures.

Yet, and this is surely fundamental here, in this Psalm we are not the shepherd, we are the sheep.

Of course human resilience is to be celebrated. The human spirit can and does surprise and inspire us.

And people of faith join in that celebration but also embrace a Spirituality of Dependence. An understanding that prayer, trust and belief in God’s love, deepens, strengthens and grounds all that is best about our humanity. As if the Spirit of God breathes into our spirit and we find ourselves completed.

So, Psalm 23 poetically and eloquently sings about us needing a shepherd, a guide and a protector. It urges us to temper our understanding that self-reliance is ultimately enough.

Miss Streeter, a member of my church in Hitchin, a lady who was blind, had the broadest of smiles on her face when she used to tell me that she felt throughout her life she had not one, but two guardian angels! Oh, who are they, I would say? She answered; they are Goodness and Mercy, and they follow me all the days of my life.

That’s what verse 6 of Psalm 23 says to us today. You are not alone.

And this is so important because of the realism it settles upon us. Faith and trust in God, the prayers we say and the longings we have, don’t mean we are given a divine pass that protects us from suffering. Wherever did we get that idea from? It isn’t a biblical one! People of faith have cancer, suffer earthquakes and live through wars. That’s always been true because Psalm 23 does not say the clever shepherd finds an alternative route that misses out Death Valley. No, it says, the loving shepherd walks with us through Death Valley. That is the norm. Suffering in life is the norm. Life teaches us that and faith teaches us that God, our Crucified God, is with us in the suffering. That Goodness and Mercy follow us all the days of our life.

And here’s a fascinating linguistic fact. In today’s Psalm, in the Hebrew, there are 26 words before the phrase in verse 4: you are with me. And there are exactly 26 words after it. As if, the writer is saying to us: God is at the very centre of this song, just as he longs to be at the very centre of our lives too.

One of the lines that may linger longest in our memory from Psalm 23 comes at its close: *and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever.*

As we’ve hinted, it may explain the psalms popularity at funerals. Yet, in Hebrew, this final verse is just as much about our every day as about our last day. In Hebrew it would read: *…and I shall return into the house of the Lord for length of days…*This is about our comings and goings and where we find a sustaining sense of purpose in a busy, even anxious life.

And the psalmist points us, as he has right through this song, once again back to God. We may come and go, looking hither and thither for running streams or green pasture, yet in the end there is, and always can be a returning, a regular and welcome sense of coming home to God and finding welcome.
Isaac Watts is sometimes called *The Godfather of English hymnody,* and as he was a Congregationalist, that means if he were around today we would probably have been a URC minister. Hooray!

Well, alongside the magnificent hymns he wrote such as *When I survey, Joy to the World and Our God, our help in ages past,* he also turned his hand to setting Psalm 23 into a hymn. Although not much sung today one verse goes like this:

*The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days
O may your House be my abode and all my work be praise.
There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come
no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.*
I think he got the essence of the last part of Psalm 23 spot on.

Growing up no home was more welcoming to me than that of my grandparents. Just down the road from my school my brother and I often had lunch there twice a week, and very often I would stay overnight. Their door was always open to us. As was their hearts.

Of course, as we grew, we went to tea less often, preferring our friends. Yet, even if we had not visited for a week or two, when we did return lemonade and cake quickly appeared along with the embrace of two people who always seemed to have all the time in the world to listen, warn and encourage.

How does this verse go in Hebrew: *and I shall return into the house of the Lord for length of days.*How does Watts put it: *There would I find a settled rest, just like a child at home…*

It’s about valuing and returning to the divine presence, whether that be in church, in people or countryside…in song or in silence.

To have that Spirituality of Vulnerability is to live with that transformational idea that God walks alongside us, goes before and behind us, like a Good Shepherd.

As John Wesley is reported to have said in his final words: *The best of all, God is with us.*

And that, in a sense, is the very essence of Psalm 23.

May we not only sing it but believe it, in the name of the Good Shepherd who guides us in right pathways for his name’s sake. Amen
 *Ian Green, Amersham, 12th October 2023*