

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota

Psalm 23
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
 April 21, 2013

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Kids, imagine with me that you are at your favorite swimming or fishing place. Picture yourself in the water. Then picture all kinds of plastic trash floating all around you? How would that make you feel? Think about the beautiful, green earth that God has given to all of us to use and to take care of. Now picture dirty/polluted lakes, rivers and streams all around us.

In our newspaper this week we received an article telling about some people who are working very hard to encourage everyone to take better care of God's earth, of our earth. **Captain Charles Moore** was sailing his research ship out in the middle of the **Pacific Ocean in 1997**. Here's what he saw on the water.

"There'd be a small bottle cap, then I'd see a bottle, and then a plastic shard... Here I am in the most remote part of the ocean – as far from land as you can get – and I can't even come out on deck without seeing plastic in the ocean." Captain Moore got very worried about all of the pollution he saw and he and others started doing some research. They found out that they were in the **"Great Pacific Garbage Patch."** Because of the currents in the ocean, garbage thrown in here and there around the world all works its way to this one spot and the garbage goes around and around, **"like a toilet that never flushes."** **"Plastic doesn't go away,"** he says, **"It just keeps bobbing around out there and ends up in the"** Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

Look at **my new bag** kids. It says, **"Keep the Planet Green."** It is a reminder to me that God wants us to help keep God's world as clean as can be. Tell me kids, what do you do with **empty milk bottles?** **Pop cans?** **Too-small clothes?** **Banana peels?** **Old newspapers?** **Garbage?** The **water that runs off your roof** when it rains? **Toys you don't use anymore?**

Kids, God has given us a wonderful world to live in. But this world is hurting some from us not taking good enough care of it. **Will you help God to care for our world?** Tomorrow is **"Earth Day."** Let's start **today**. Thank you. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

I read the **23rd Psalm** at almost every death bed and funeral. I think that it gives great hope to those who are facing the end of their life. But, Psalm 23 is **more than just a funeral psalm**. It is a **good LIFE psalm!** Hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, a psalm writer painted a wonderful picture of people, the world and of God. Reflect with me about this ancient statement of faith.

- **“The Lord is my shepherd;”** – There is a God who faithfully loves and cares for God’s sheep – you and me.
- **“I shall not be in want.”** – What we **have** is what we **need**. All that is important for us to have life will be provided by this Shepherd God.
- **“The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures”** – God’s lush and amazing provision surrounds us. There is enough for everybody.
- **“and leads me beside still waters.”** – My little dog used to be afraid to lap water out of our lake if the wind was blowing. Sheep are fearful of moving water. God moves to calm us and to give us peaceful nourishment.

The amazingly beautiful creation that the psalmist speaks of is the same one that we live in every day. Look at the world around you. The psalmist believes that it comes from God. So do I. Do you?

The Psalm continues.

- **“You restore my soul, O LORD,”** – God comes again and again to give us hope and life here and now.
- **“and guide me along right pathways for your name’s sake.”** – God provides safe and morally right paths for us to follow **God’s will** for our world.

But, if that is true, how is it that **Boston Marathon runners** get killed by terrorist bombs? The ideal valley, amazing creation that we live in, also knows enemies, sickness and death. God’s creation is amazingly beautiful, but also broken, not completely the way God longs for it to be. The psalmist knows that full well.

- **“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”** – The list of troubles in this world is long. North Korea challenges. Malaria, AIDS and cancer still claim thousands of lives. Climate change threatens increasing weather catastrophes. A huge percentage of the population, even of the United States, goes to bed hungry each night. While at the same time, my own overeating threatens to take my life. The psalmist knew of and we know of plenty of fearsome, troubling and heartbreaking things about our lives and world. Somehow, however, the psalmist found reason to fight on.
- **“I shall fear no evil; for you are with me;”** – Come hell or high water, God is present. We are not alone. God keeps taking care of this precious valley, this amazing creation, despite all the evil that rises up around us. During the days following the Boston Marathon bombing, people struggled between focusing upon the **evil event** or upon a **more hopeful outcome**. **Kurt Hagestuen** forwarded an email to me. He said that many people have been sending this across the internet in response to the bombing. It shows a photo of Fred Rogers, **“Mr. Rogers.”** Emblazoned over the photo is one of Mr. Roger’s sayings. **“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”** One newspaper reporter said that he was not surprised to see later runners keep right on going past the finish line to run to nearby hospitals to donate blood. Other witnesses applied tourniquets to the wounded and still others cradled victim’s heads in their own laps. Those are scenes of the **Shepherd God walking in the midst of the dark valley**. That is **God moving through us to face down evil and to bring new life**.
- **“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”** – God comes to defend and to guide us. The shepherd’s **staff** works to keep the sheep from straying away from the safety of the flock. The shepherd’s **rod** moves to defend us from the predators.
- **“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;”** - God is in the business of feeding people. God is in the business of welcoming folks into safe haven – even with enemies all around us. God lifts us up and

honors us even in the face of our enemies. God welcomes and feeds us here today and again and again

- **“You anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over.”** – God is the perfect host. God’s guests are welcomed into a safe place, banquet table overflowing, and head anointed, ready even for celebration. In God’s house, kingdom and world - **life trumps even death.**
- **“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,”** – **“Mercy”** is the Hebrew word for the **kind of love God has for us:**
 - A. Enduring and loyal
 - B. Seeing us through weakness, confusion, despair, temptation and defeat.
 - C. Inspiring us with hope and courage.
 - D. Remaining with us even when we are unlovable or have turned away.
 - E. It is an **“I will not let you go”** kind of love.

“Follow” literally means **“pursuit.”** God will not sit and twiddle thumbs while we wander off into the dark valley alone. God **vigorously pursues** us to give us life, hope and newness.

- **“And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”** - **What is most valuable** is not **“what”** we have in our lives, but **“Who”** we have in our lives – or **Who** has us. The psalm writer didn’t just read some book or memorize some Bible verses in order to come to the place of peace that he portrays in Psalm 23. Peace of mind like that comes only from undoubting trust in God. It comes from years of trusting and testing God’s promises for us. **That kind of peace** has the **power to change how we live** in this world right here and now.

This valley, our valley, God’s valley – will we love and trust God to faithfully love and care for us? Will we **treasure** God’s creation? Will we **care for** God’s world? Psalm 23 **isn’t just a funeral psalm.** It is a **GOOD LIFE** psalm.

In our Gospel text for today, John 10:27, Jesus says it like this. **“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”**

Amazingly beautiful creation. Broken, limping world. I’m going to love, thank and trust God. What are you going to do? “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want – forever.” That’s LIFE! Thanks be to God.
Amen.