

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
March 27, 2011
©2011

A Series on The 23rd Psalm – I. What A Difference A Word Can Make

Psalm 23 (New Living Translation) The LORD is my shepherd; I have everything I need. 2 He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. 3 He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. 4 Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. 5 You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You welcome me as a guest, anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. 6 Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever.

Psalm 23 (New Revised Standard translation) The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; 2 he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Did you know that there have been over 450 translations of the Bible into English, beginning over a thousand years ago,¹ and probably uncountable translations into almost all of the world's languages? But the task of translation has both its perils and its opportunities. The perils include the fact that language changes over time, and what once was an apt and understandable rendering of a word from one language to another no longer makes sense – or may even convey a totally different meaning than it did at the time of the translation. The closing of St. Paul's famous "love chapter" from First Corinthians was translated 500 years ago in the King James Version like this: *"But now faith, hope, and charity, these three, abide, but the greatest of these is charity."* But language changes and the word "charity" simply does mean at all what it meant in 16th century England. A couple of other examples: the word "girl" in English originally

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_translations_of_the_Bible

meant a young person of either sex; now using it to address a young male would either be taken as evidence of confusion or perhaps as some sort of insult. The word “nice” in the 13th century meant foolish or stupid, and between then and now the word went through many changes of meaning including wanton, extravagant, elegant, and strange.² One of the perils of translation is, therefore, that a word or phrase that once conveyed something powerfully and accurately may one day no longer do so – or can even communicate the opposite of what was intended!

The **opportunities** of translation, though, are the flip side of the perils. One of the reasons that there are so many English translations of the Bible is that someone believed that a particular rendering no longer spoke quite as clearly as was needed or that a current translation no longer really spoke very well to this or that group. The playwright George Bernard Shaw once said that the United States and England are two countries separated by a common language³ and how true that sometimes seems. And so, for example, the 1970s British translation called The New English Bible aimed at middle- to upper-class Britishers now often sounds stilted to American ears. So the **opportunity** of translation is to offer a fresh way of reclaiming God’s Word, a more apt way of speaking to folks in language that is more their own.

Another extremely important factor affecting translation is theology and the translator’s deepest beliefs about the nature of God. It is utterly inevitable that folks bring, consciously or unconsciously, such theological presumptions when they seek to translate the scriptures. It can’t be helped. But those theological assumptions affect the meaning that is heard. And so, over the next couple of weeks I want to reflect with you about some of the meanings of the 23rd Psalm and how different translations can sometimes radically affect those meanings. This, by the way, is one of the reasons that

²<http://ezinearticles.com/?-Etymology--How-Words-Change-Over-Time&id=12709>

³<http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/897.html>

it is so helpful when you are doing your own Bible study to read a particular scripture from several different translations: the different theological angles and the differing word choices can cause you to think more deeply, allow God to more fully speak to you.

The place that I want to concentrate in this opening sermon of this series is on how two very different English versions of the 23rd Psalm translate the second verse of the Psalm; did you note the subtle but important difference in the two versions? The New Revised Standard, echoing the King James version, says *“He makes me lie down in green pastures”*; but the New Living Translation says *“He lets me rest in green meadows.”* “He **makes** me lie down” and “He **lets** me lie down.” I am thinking that those don’t really convey the same meaning at all! I once said to one of our teenagers one Saturday afternoon *“I’m going to let you clean the bathroom this afternoon.”* She gave me this look – and I can’t say that I blame her – as only a teenager can do at a parent’s ridiculousness. “Lets me” and “makes me” just aren’t the same.

Now, neither translation of this verse – “He makes me lie down” versus “He lets me lie down” – is necessarily wrong. But they do come from very different perspectives and have very different assumptions about life. I think of the perspective offered by “He lets me lie down” as, for example, the perspective of a youth, one who has that amazing sense of invulnerability that so often characterizes teenagers sometimes, that charming sense that he or she is in fact in control of things, that optimism that is so often the mark of folks just about to set out on their adult journeys. I think I have told you about the time when I was about 16 and was leaving the house once and my mother said to me, as she always did, *“Be careful.”* I stopped and looked very serious and responded to her *“Mother, I’m sixteen; you really don’t need to worry about me anymore.”*

And sometimes life is indeed like that, isn’t it? Sometimes life is very good, and

worry-free, and things go your way, and you feel like you are achieving your purpose in life, and you have control of your own destiny, and that what you decide you can indeed do. Now while I suspect that that feeling was *more* a part of many folks' younger days, yet still there are days even now in my life and I hope yours when we are content and when we do feel like your efforts indeed make a difference and we are proud of what we can accomplish. But, my friends, those are the very times when you should take God up on God's offer – to allow you, to *let* you, as that first translation has it, lie down in those green pastures. Why? Well, even in the midst of a secure and contented life, when things seem to be going well and you are able to more or less control what is important to you, when your efforts turn out for good and you are feeling fulfilled – then that is precisely the time that you need to make sure that you stop and give thanks to God for those blessings of a life where things are going so well and where your efforts have borne such fruit.

For you see, if you don't accept that offer to lie down in the pasture and pray a prayer of thanks or two or three, then you will often increasingly be tempted, even unconsciously, to think that your life's situation is entirely of your own making. You will become tempted to be proud of what really isn't your doing. You may be more and more prone to suffer the illusion that you are self-made. Because think about it – while you may indeed have those times when your talents are having exactly the effect you wanted, those talents were very likely nurtured by a family who first saw those talents and nurtured them. If you are a great piano player, it is likely not just your own doing, but also the doing of parents who saw that talent, maybe sacrificed to get you lessons, and even made you practice! To forget to give thanks for all the people who have made you who you are is to make yourself more narrow than you need to be, and more deluded than you ought to be. There is nothing wrong with a life that is going well – God celebrates it with you. There is nothing wrong with warranted pride about your

abilities and your efforts – God celebrates them with you. But take God up on that offer – every day, for at least five minutes, find one of those pastures, to lie down (whether literally or metaphorically), and to pray a prayer or two of thanksgiving to God for what you are able to do or be thanks to the gifts and the people that God has put in your path.

But what of the other translation and its way of rendering this verse? Well, sometimes feeling in control, feeling like our efforts indeed make the difference we want, feeling like we are succeeding in what we set out to do is just **not at all** how we feel. And it is then when the other translation – “*He **makes** me lie down in green pastures*” – is oh-so-right and can be such a blessing. First, though, let me say something about this whole notion of making someone do something. I believe that God respects us and honors us enough to never **compel** us to do anything against our will; God does not violate the free-will we were created with. If God did, then our freedom would be a sham. But nonetheless, God indeed sometimes tries very hard and very compellingly and urgently to get our attention; there are times and occasions in our lives that God indeed **urgently** wants us to get down in that pasture **now!** And hopefully we do not ignore such promptings, and hopefully later we will be able to say “I’m glad God got in my face and made me lie down!” I’m thinking of two kinds of situations where it is God who may very forcefully wants to have us lie down in that pasture, and we ignore we ignore what God wants at our peril.

First, sometimes life just stinks. It does. Sometimes life dirties us, doesn’t it? Sometimes we are the cause of that dirt, that stink, and sometimes the stink has been slung on us through no fault of our own. We tell little lies that become bigger lies and we don’t know how to stop; we say something about somebody behind their backs that is hurtful and it reaches their ears. The Hawaiian pidgin dialect has a wonderfully

accurate phrase describing doing just that: “talking stink” about someone. Or we find ourselves in a very messy situation that can leave us saddened and dispirited and feeling soiled. It is on those occasions that God says “I want you to get down in the pasture.” Why? In ancient times, sheep got pretty smelly. And there was little in the way to bathe with. But there was sweet-smelling clover. And the shepherd, when the stink of the sheep could be stood no more, would have those sheep lie down in that clover, and roll around in it – and they would smell better.

The pasture for us could be honest acknowledgment of how we hurt someone or did them dirty, true repentance and sorrow for that, and a resolve to make amends. It’s hard to do that when we are in the midst of the stink. But God’s desire that we lay down in the pasture of honesty can make us clean again.

Second, there are times that you and I do things that are completely at odds with what we know we ought to do. Sometimes we even do so quite aware that we shouldn’t be doing those things. We may make choices that we know aren’t good ones. We can do things, engage in patterns of behavior, in ways of thinking about ourselves that do not nourish us but instead sometimes would try to consume us with guilt or shame that is immobilizing. An ancient Palestinian shepherd knew that sheep could do the very same thing. He or she (for there were and are female shepherds in that part of the world) knew that left to their own devices sheep would go into a new pasture and eat themselves absolutely silly until they dropped and until the pasture was in such bad shape that it would take years and years to recover – left to their own devices, the sheep would kill the food that kept them alive through eating too much of it! If you have ever been to the Hawaiian island of Moloka’i or seen pictures of the island of Kao`olawe then you have seen the dramatic and disastrous effects such overgrazing

can have, both for the sheep and for the land itself.⁴ So the shepherd let the sheep eat some, but then made them lie down. It's really hard to eat very efficiently when you are lying down. Thus the shepherd saved the sheep from their own foolish predilections and showed them a better way that would not be so destructive to themselves or the land.

What in your life is consuming you instead of nourishing you? What ways of thinking about yourself contribute to a sense of guilt or shame? What patterns seem to be trapping you? God very much wants you to know freedom from those and therefore urgently hopes that you'll lie down in that pasture for awhile. God wants you – and God will help you to – find other ways of being, other patterns of behavior, other ways of thinking about yourself or others that do not dispirit or consume you. God will send you companions to help you not over-eat at the table of worry, or guilt, of anxiety, of fear – they may be friends, or it may be a counselor that could do you some good, or it may be the church. But whatever it is, the message of this little verse of this beloved Psalm is this: stop it. Lie down. Right now. Let God begin to find you, to touch you, to heal what is hurting.

Because, you know, that's what God wants to do. And that's because, just as the Psalm's opening line says, God is indeed the Good Shepherd – the One who knows each of the sheep, the One who is pained when even one is lost or wanders off, the One who is overjoyed when the sheep are safe and home and well-fed and content. So, lie down. Lie down.

⁴Cf., e.g.,
http://cramp.wcc.hawaii.edu/Watershed_Files/Molokai/WS_Molokai_molokai_SouthMolokai.htm