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II. The 23rd Psalm: Part Two of Three “Describing and Doing

Psalm 23

From The Bible in Basic English 1 The Lord takes care of me as his sheep; I will not be without any good thing. 2 He makes a resting-place for me in the green fields: he is my guide by the quiet waters. 3 He gives new life to my soul: he is my guide in the ways of righteousness because of his name. 4 Yes, though I go through the valley of deep shade, I will have no fear of evil; for you are with me, your rod and your support are my comfort. 5 You make ready a table for me in front of my haters: you put oil on my head; my cup is overflowing. 6 Truly, blessing and mercy will be with me all the days of my life; and I will have a place in the house of the Lord all my days.

From Eugene Petersen's translation entitled The Message. 1 God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. 2 You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. 3 True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. 4 Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure. 5 You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing. 6 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.

In any translation of the Bible, the translator must make many, many decisions. Last week we saw that the second verse of this Psalm can be translated as either the more familiar “*He **makes** me lie down in green pastures*” or the less familiar “*He **lets** me lie down....*” Neither is “right” or “wrong,” but both illuminate very different things and have very different theological presumptions about the nature of God and the nature of human life. There are other decisions that must be made in any translations, too, because, not only is our context as 21st century Americans so very different from that of the ancient Palestinian Jews and Christians, but also because the Hebrew and Greek of the original writings are simply very, very different in their form, their structure, their grammar. One small example: In Hebrew, there are no vowels; thus, translators

sometimes have to guess at a word's meaning and different guesses at vowels can lead to very different meanings. Imagine if that were true in English, and imagine that you are a translator faced with the following two letters: "M" and "L" – but there are no vowels. Is it supposed to be translated as "male" or "mule" (well, maybe those are the same, sometimes), or "mile" or "mole" or "meal"? The phrase "going the second mile" is rather different from "going the second meal"!

Now, for those of you who hated grammar in school, we're nearly done, but just one more example – which is where I want to focus today's sermon. Translators are often faced with the choice of rendering verses in the "first person" – "*The Lord is my shepherd*" or in the "third-person" – "*He makes me lie down in green pastures*" – or in the "second-person" **addressing** God – "**Your** rod and your staff, they comfort me." More succinctly, it's the difference between saying "*I am,*" "*You are,*" and "*He is.*"¹ All three forms are present in our two translations for today; the opening of this Psalm in the Bible in Basic English's translation is in the third person: "*The Lord takes care of me as his sheep.*" It is a statement about someone else; it is a description; it's third-person. But Eugene Petersen's translation of that first verse is very simple, very personal, almost intimate, and rendered in the first person: "*God, my shepherd!*"

Now, what do we do with all of that? Well, let me suggest this:

"Third-person" often **describe** things. *Kansas City has the best barbecue. El Taco Rey has amazing Mexican food. Josh and John's Ice Cream is incredible.* Most theological statements are also third-person descriptions too: *God is love. God is just. Nothing can kill God's love.* And so on and so on. Third-person statements are the kind that we discuss together; we can reason about them with other people. And we should. Oh my, we should. One of the best things about the church is that the church at its best is to be the place where our beliefs about God are formed and shaped and

¹Cf., e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical_person

even sometimes challenged by other people. Because without the discipline of other people taking your ideas about God seriously enough to discuss them with you, it's possible to end up with some pretty bizarre or even hurtful ideas about God. One example: if you believe that God is the sort of God from whom you must **earn** your salvation, **earn** your forgiveness, **earn** His love, then you are holding an idea that will make you anxious every day of your life and which is at odds with the gospel. Having other people to help you correct and sharpen your beliefs is one of the best things that we do for one another. It's why we have our regular Bible and other kinds of studies – to help us to firm up and sometimes change our beliefs about God in light of the Good News of the Gospel, for we always need to make sure that the things we say about God make moral sense.

But as crucial as having morally credible beliefs about God that are consistent with the Gospel is, that is not enough. One's faith, as Jesus reminded us, needs to include loving God with all one's **mind**, but it also included loving God with all one's **heart** or **soul**. Which means that faith is not simply about having good beliefs but is also about having a life-giving **relationship** with God. And David, the future king of Israel, the writer of this Psalm, affirms that fact and acknowledges his own relationship with God – not just the things that he knows, but the things that he feels deep down inside, the things that give him life – with his turn to the **second-person** in this Psalm. Did you hear it? At a crucial point in the Psalm, David **addresses** God, using the second-person: He says this: “...**you** are with me, **your** rod and **your** support are my comfort” and “**You** make ready a table for me in front of my haters: **you** put oil on my head; my cup is overflowing.” Do you hear the difference here between the third-person **description** of what God is like, and this second-person way of **speaking to** God? The first is like you're saying that so-and-so is a good friend; the second is like

speaking to that friend and thanking him or her for that friendship. The first is a **description**, the second is a **testimony**. The first is **objective**; the second is **intimate** and **personal** as fits a relationship that is intimate and personal. And that's what David is doing in his Psalm when he says 'O God, *"your rod and your staff comfort me; you put oil on my head; you feed me even in the midst of threats to my life."* It is as if David is saying: *"God, in the midst of trials your leading and your protection has been such a comfort; in the midst of those times when life is like a dry and hot desert you have ministered to me with oil for my soul that has made my life less dry and hurtful; and even when life and people and circumstances trouble me still you nourish me body, mind, and soul."*

But there is one final from in the Psalm, that of the **"first person."** We hear it in the opening and closing verses. The Psalm opens with, in the more traditional translation, *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want"* and closes with *"I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* These are not *just* **description**, and they are not speaking **to** God. No, these are statements of **decision**. They represents not intimacy but **intention**. And thus they remind us of something very important: that no matter what we may *know*, and no matter what our *relationship* with God might be, finally and ultimately and always **we must decide how we will *respond* to that knowledge and relationship, how we will decide to act and react in *recognition* of that relationship.** And David **decides** that he will trust God. He decides to act as if life is and will be the place where, under the care of God, he will not in fact want in any **ultimate** sense. Sure, he would have his other desires and wants, and goodness knows he sometimes failed at being the person he knew he should be. But ultimately and finally, David nonetheless **committed** himself in that opening and closing verse of the Psalm to act as if indeed God was finally in charge, that God was finally ultimate not

the hurtful things of the world, that God would supply the deepest and most important of his needs. And that's **decision**, not description!

But it could have gone differently, you know. David could have said after all that description of God, all that acknowledgment of the relationship with God, that nevertheless he was going to act as if the world was out to get him, as if God didn't really have the ultimate say in and guarantee for his life. He *could* have **decided** to act as if it were his job to build *his* house that would stand forever, rather than trusting God's promise that God would give him an eternal dwelling place. But he didn't. He trusted God. And he acted.

So, my friends, did Martin Luther when he began what became the Protestant Reformation in the early 1500s by nailing his protests about church practices to the door of the Wittenberg church. He too moved from description – he **knew** what was wrong with the church – to **decision** and **action**. He could have just muttered to himself and made accommodations with what he saw as corrupt practices, but he didn't. At great risk to himself he didn't. Instead what he said was this: *“God help me, here I stand; I can do no other.”* And God's church was the better for it. He trusted God. And he acted. When one of our Disciples of Christ founders had, after long deliberation, decided that no one had the right to keep him from the communion table, that he did not need the elders of the church to judge him worthy enough to give him his ticket, his token, to come to the Lords Supper – when he threw that token down on the Table and walked out he too moved from description to decision, from third-person reflection to first-person action.

Tomorrow we shall pause and remember the life of a great man, a great American, a mighty Christian. On what will be the 43rd anniversary of his assassination, we can give thanks, as both Americans and as Christians, that he too was one who moved from **description** to **decision** and action. And he did so at what would prove to

be the ultimate cost. He did so in a time and place where it was downright dangerous to. Now, too could have just muttered to himself and made accommodations with what he saw as corrupt practices, but he didn't. He decided to honor what he knew and honor his relationship with God by courageous action that indeed eventually martyred him. His own words are more eloquent than mine can ever be as he speaks about this move from third-person to first-person, from knowledge to action, in his eloquent "*Letter From a Birmingham Jail.*" Birmingham, you'll recall, is where arsonists firebombed a Black church, injuring scores of people gathered to worship, and killing three young girls as they sat dressed in their Sunday finest at Sunday School to learn about God. Yet, in the face of that situation, some of the Birmingham citizens had pleaded with Dr. King to "go slow"; here is part of his response that moves indeed from knowledge to a call for decision and action:

... when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim..., when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six- year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that [it] is closed to colored children... , when your first name becomes "nigger," ... [when] your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."... then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men [and women] are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.... Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but [whose ugliness] must be opened... to the natural medicines of air and light, [so to] injustice must be exposed... to the light of human conscience.... Human progress... comes through the tireless efforts of

men [and women who are] willing to be co-workers with God...²

“Willing co-workers with God.” Knowledge and relationship; third-person and second-person – each is vitally important. What we know and what our relationships are like are indeed crucial. But finally, my friends, in all our lives, there are those moments that also demand that we move to the **first**-person, to decision and to action, to live out our beliefs, to show our trust in God, to follow the gentle shepherd where He would lead us, to indeed decide to be “willing co-workers with God.”

So, as we close this morning, let me ask you: Is there something in your life that you are accommodating but know that you shouldn't? Is there something that, as a Christian, deeply troubles your conscience about something in society? Or is there someplace where you can't quite match up the character of your relationships with what you need to do? Are there things that you know and need the courage to act on that knowledge? Then, my friends, David and his lovely and powerful Psalm invites you to prayerfully move to action, with thanksgiving for those who, like Dr. King, have helped show the way and who can inspire your courage to change. And as we do so, we take heart and comfort in exactly what David said: “The Lord **is** my shepherd.” He is indeed. He is indeed.

²Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” www.thekingcenter.org/prog/non/Letter.pdf