

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, May 12, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“SURROUNDED BY THE SHEPHERD’S CARE”

Psalm 23

Confirmation Sunday is a special day as we welcome these young people into membership by profession of faith. It is good to do it on Mother’s Day, because we have several proud mothers here and fathers too, along with grandparents and other relatives. Today these young people have confirmed the promises their parents made at their baptism, and accepted for themselves the faith they have been taught in church and home. Confirmation is not graduation from the church. It’s a pathway to greater involvement in the church and further growth in faith. In fact, you confirmands now have a responsibility beyond these walls. I hope you will always be able to tell others, “I’m a Christian, a follower of Jesus.” You don’t have to push your faith on others, but you don’t have to hide your faith either. I hope you will show others that you are a Christian by the way you live and act and think and speak. Christians are called to be different than the world around them. No, we are not weird, just different because we seek to live according to the mind of Christ which we have been given.

I say to the confirmands’ families – celebrate with them today and continually encourage them in the Christian life. And parents, you can grow in faith right along with your children. Young people often raise issues of faith with parents. I have heard of young people who encouraged their parents to come to church. And to the confirmands, I hope you will attend church as often as you can. You may not always understand everything. That true for adults, too. But something good will always stick with you. I hope you will pray every day too, and read your Bible. Even one verse a day will help transform your thinking and keep you walking in the way of Jesus.

Along with John 3:16, the 23rd Psalm is the probably the most quoted part of Scripture. When ministers run out of words to say to a person or family in need or in distress, we open the Bible and read the 23rd Psalm. The words seem to have a power far greater than my own words of comfort and hope. It really is a passage of Scripture worth memorizing for our comfort and strengthening.

Now David was a gifted musician and poet. He was close to God. He was aware of his spiritual need. Perhaps David wrote this 23rd Psalm while he was a young man out in the wilderness looking after his Father’s sheep. As he reflected on his own work of caring for the sheep, he had the sudden spiritual insight that God was caring for him in the same way. “The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.” Or perhaps King David wrote this Psalm closer to the end of his life, after he had experienced God’s care through all the changing scenes of life. But in either case, the truth is still the same. David knew that he was surrounded by care of the Shepherd God.

It’s true for us, too. We are surrounded by the Shepherd God’s care. Now our Jewish friends share this Psalm with us. It comes to us from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Christians see the fulfillment of this Psalm in Christ. He said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” So we can think of God as being the Good Shepherd in this Psalm. Or we can think of the Good Shepherd

as Christ himself. So let's take the Psalm and use it as a description of Jesus' ministry for us and to us. Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd surrounds us with his care. Now we say, "a person can't be in two places at once." But the Good Shepherd can be, for he is the Risen and Living One, our Lord and Saviour.

First, the Good Shepherd is in out in front of us, going before us, leading us. David says, "he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake."

In the Gospels Jesus is always out in front of the disciples leading the way. So our Lord goes ahead of us, blazing the trail for us, preparing the way for us to follow. He leads us beside still waters. He restores our souls by inviting us to himself. He says, "Come unto me, all you who are heavily burdened and I will give you rest." Furthermore, just as shepherd would lead his sheep on solid and safe paths, so our Good Shepherd goes before us. He leads us in the right paths, the paths of truth and love, paths which lead to life, paths laid out for us in God's word. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

It's certainly a blessing to know that the Lord goes ahead of us, preparing the way for us to follow. We don't know what's around any corner, but he knows what's ahead and he is already there putting in place what we will need. It's like expectant parents preparing a room in their home with, crib, furniture, clothing, and everything else that's needed for when the baby is born and arrives home. As someone put it "God in his lovingkindness meets us at every corner."

A young fellow was playing hockey one day and was hit in the eye by a puck. He was brought to the hospital and for a while didn't know how badly his eye had been injured. He later told his minister, "As I was being wheeled through the hospital corridors, I just kept saying to myself, 'My God, in his loving kindness, shall meet me at every corner.'" It is strengthening to know that no matter whatever awaits you around the next corner the Lord is already there preparing for you your arrival.

Jesus tells us that he has prepared a place in heaven for all who believe in him. "In my Father's house are many rooms, I go to prepare a place for you." And he has even prepared good works for us to do here on earth. The Bible tells us that "we were created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

I'm reminded of the little girl who wanted to thank her Mother on Mother's Day. She went into her mother's flower garden, picked a pretty flower, put it in a vase with water and presented it to her mother. Mother received the gift with a smile and thanked her. But really it was all made possible because mother had planted and looked after the flower to begin with. Just so the Lord has already prepared in advance good works for you and me to do, in accord with our gifts. The flower has already been planted.

He leadeth me. Yes, our Lord is out in front of us, going before us, preparing the way for us.

Next, the Good Shepherd surrounds us with his care by walking beside us. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and staff they comfort me."

Sheep have poor eyesight and often walk with their heads down. As they enter a dark valley to get to pasture or water or to cross to the other side, the shepherd draws very close to them, to keep them from falling off the path into a ravine. His rod keeps the sheep moving straight ahead. His staff pulls back a sheep when it wanders off the path and becomes stranded. At night the shepherd's near presence keeps the flock calm, especially if they hear wolves howling or sense lions prowling. They know that the shepherd's rod and staff can drive off those enemies. So they can lie down and rest in peace.

We all walk through dark valleys in life, times of illness, confusion, loneliness, distress. And in such valleys the Good Shepherd draws very close to us, to comfort us, to strengthen us, to keep us on the right track, and to draw us back to himself when we slip. We need not fear the power of evil, for his saving power is greater. By his cross and resurrection, he has defeated the power of sin and evil and death. Nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup runneth over." At the Lord's Table the bread and cup remind us of the Lord's death for our sins, his resurrection from the dead and his presence with us now. In the darkest valley he is our comforter. Even when we enter into the valley of the shadow of death, the Good Shepherd will draw near and bring us safely to eternal life in the Father's house. Yes, Jesus the Good Shepherd, not only leads us, he walks with us, right beside us.

Here's the final aspect of his surrounding care. *The Good Shepherd comes behind us.* "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Sometimes the shepherd needs to go behind the sheep or they just won't go where they are supposed to. They have to be encouraged and driven from behind. That's what a shepherd did for his sheep. Shepherds cared for each sheep individually and for the whole flock, just as Jesus does for his church. He cares for each one of us individually and he cares for the whole flock. Sometimes each one of us and the whole church needs to be prodded from behind, to get us moving, instead of standing still. Certainly I need that sometimes.

But most of us I am so glad that my Saviour follows me, follows all of us, with goodness and mercy. When I have made a mess of things, when I have sinned and fallen short, he comes behind me with mercy and forgiveness. He follows me and clean up my messes. By his blood he covers my sin and clothes me with his goodness. His mercy to me enables me to be merciful to others. And by the power of the Holy Spirit he fills me with his own goodness so that I can more obediently walk in the right paths. And it's the same for you too. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Thank God for that! And because of his goodness and mercy, not my goodness but his goodness, "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd surrounds us with his loving care, on all sides – out front, beside and behind. His care can be counted on all the days of our lives. For He is true to his name and his promises. He does these things "for his name's sake, because that's who he is." And because we trust the Good Shepherd and know that we are surrounded by his care we say with confidence and gratitude, "My cup runneth over."