

**The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me
in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen. Psalm 23**

Isn't there such comfort in sameness? To hear scripture in the language of our childhood. It's referred to as "heart-language" - speaking and hearing the language we first learned, the language that was spoken in our home. My first Christmas here I moved the 5 o'clock worship into Fellowship Hall because I thought it would be a fun and interesting venue to play with... not realizing that Christmas Eve here - in the sanctuary - was for some, what Christmas Eve looks like... it was different and unfamiliar. Sameness can sometimes be equated with sacredness. I had a similar reaction to when our family attended a wedding at a mega-church that looked just like a basketball court... because it was a basketball court. It was the church's gymnasium during the week and the hoops were raised on Sundays for worship. But it didn't look like church to me... there were no stained-glass windows, nothing beautiful, nothing that looked like sacred space. We all have ideas of what church should be. And there's comfort to be found in sameness.

I went to the *Messy Church* national conference last weekend in Huntington Beach. The *Messy Church* team from the UK was there to lead the conference. What they told us about church attendance in Great Britain is that churches tend to have about 40 people. The UK has long been identified as a “post-Christian” nation... and church attendance reflects that. *Messy Church* was created there in the UK, because this group of Anglicans realized that there were generations of people who weren’t going to step through the doors of traditional church... people with the same longing we all have to explore God and spirituality... but not in the same way. The *Messy Church* team referred to the church as we know it, as the “inherited church”. This is the church that many of us have grown up in, that’s mostly stayed the same, that is familiar and comforting. But in our own increasingly “post-Christian” nation we see that it doesn’t reach many people. The *Messy Church* creators realized a need to do something different to draw people in... past the doors, past the pews and the stained glass windows and into the heart and love of Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite quotes is from the 19th century French priest and philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

I believe that that all people are looking for authentic spiritual experiences... but not in the same ways we know it. And I believe that the desire we all have to connect with our spirituality is in fact God’s longing for us... an echo of God’s love and desire to love and heal all of us... to be in relationship with us.

Part of the reason for the recent worship survey, which we also sent to our church-preschool families, was to find out what might reach and teach and bless people

for whom “inherited church” isn’t meaningful. How can we offer Christian spirituality in different heart-languages?

This morning we’ve heard Psalm 23 in two different languages... both English, but with very different words and cadences. The Message translation is my heart-language. Eugene Peterson, a professor and Presbyterian pastor, translated the ancient words of scripture into not just words, but feelings and experiences, that I relate to, that I understand.

This Psalm is one of the most important psalms of the church... one of the most familiar and beloved. The church prays it when we need comfort, when we need to remember who God is: a shepherd, who guides us, who leads us to places of peace and beauty, who cares about the state of our souls, whose desire is for us to live and breathe and recognize the sacredness of life. The 23rd Psalm reassures us that God is the Good Shepherd who, throughout time and eternity, is the same.

The ancient Israelites, who first sang and prayed Psalm 23, knew the Temple as God’s dwelling, the place they went to look for and find God. Just as every human king lived and ruled from a palace, the Temple was God’s God’s palace. The Message translation reveals that longing to look for and find God in the Temple: “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.” The King James translation says: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me...” but the Hebrew word for *mercy* is *hesed*, a Hebrew word for God’s persistent, pursuing love for us. One resource describes *hesed* this way: “It’s the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, love of our God!” We - all of humanity - are chased by the God who loves us, and for our sake

would lead us (if we are willing to be led, like trusting sheep who are led by a guiding shepherd) into places of beauty and refreshment to restore our souls. Have you ever thought about it, or realized, that God's beauty and love are chasing you? Doesn't it make you want to stop running and be caught by God? In the worship program on page 3, half way down the page, there's a place for your thoughts, for images, or for stick figures... whatever comes to you. It says: **How do I know that God is my shepherd? How do I feel (or know, or think about, or practice) God's presence?** Or in other language... how do I make space in my life... my busy, over-scheduled life - to allow God, the Good Shepherd, to restore my soul? Take a moment and ponder this.

[PAUSE]

Because human beings were created by God, I think one of our most fundamental longings is to experience God. Just as we are all different kinds of students - some of us auditory, some of us kinesthetic, some logical, some physical - we are different kinds of spiritual learners too. I recently read, and shared this a couple of weeks ago, that in the Middle Ages church authorities decided that people were too unruly in church - moving, dancing, shouting - and so pews were put in to keep order. And it seems that since that time there is one way to worship, one way to experience God... in church. But that's not how we all learn, and as a culture, and as we've evolved, we've rebelled against this idea that there is only one way to do something.

At the *Messy Church* conference last weekend, I heard someone say that we're about 30 years behind the UK, and that we're finding ourselves, as they have, fewer and fewer generations drawn to the "inherited church". It's a challenge to keep the things that are meaningful and sacred to us, and also to do something different... it's a

challenge and I believe, an invitation from the Holy Spirit, to learn to communicate Christian spirituality in other ways, in different heart-languages.

Most often I pray the 23rd Psalm at funerals. Sorrow and loss are a common human language, and in those times even people who have no religious experience are drawn to the church, and drawn to God. This psalm reminds us that no easy path is promised to us, no “get through life unscathed” card given, but that (and this is often overlooked, and almost seems to me like insider language) God is with us, always and everywhere, and even walks with us through the valleys of shadow and death. It seems to be our human lot to want that “get through life unscathed” card and to be angry and dismissive of God when we pass through those “death-dark ravines”. Psalm 23 reminds us of God’s goodness throughout our lives... a cautionary note, almost, to be aware of God’s goodness... so that when we and those we love walk through the valleys of shadows and death we are not so afraid, not so angry, not so dismissive... because all along we’ve been walking side by side with the Good Shepherd who leads us to green pastures and still waters and restores our souls. There’s another place in the worship program on page 3, with another question for you to ponder. It says: **Where do I look - and how do I find - God when I walk through the “valley of the shadow of death” or “pass through death-dark ravines”?** Take a moment to ponder how you’re walking now with God so that when you plunge into the ravine or fall into the shadows, you still know - your soul trusts - that the Good Shepherd walks with you. [PAUSE]

There seems to be a lot splattered about the ugliness of human nature in the news. Harvey Winestein, Kim Jong-un, and neo-Nazis come to mind. We all share a common human language of greed and selfishness, intolerance and indifference. Your

sins, and mine, may seem small and insignificant held up against more blatant and more public sins... but we are all sinners, all in need of saving. This ancient prayer, the 23rd psalm, asks nothing of us - no confession, no promises - it's just reassurance that God loves us. Always. Everywhere. And no matter what. God's love is the same.

We don't need to be afraid that we aren't good enough, or worthy... because we aren't, we can't be. That's why we need a savior, we need Jesus. When we know Jesus (In the biblical meaning to "know" is an intimate act, an intimate relationship.) When we know Jesus, our humanity is restored, and we come to speak and hear a new language, a new universal language that all the world longs to hear: of love and kindness, of goodness, gentleness, and faithfulness, of mercy, and of community. There are generations of people who need to hear and learn this faith-language, because without it... without learning the language of love, the future of humanity looks bleak. This is an opportunity we have ~ to share our faith, and the language of love and salvation, with those who don't know Jesus; to communicate Christian spirituality in ways that are different than the language of faith we're inherited.

There's a little creek that runs through our church parking lot and I can't pass it without pausing to remember that "He leadeth me beside the still waters and restoreth my soul". In times when I am afraid, Psalm 23 reminds me of those green pastures and still waters (metaphors for the kindness and peace) that God provides. This psalm reminds me that even when I am in the presence of enemies, the Lord stands beside me. In ancient times kings would throw extravagant feasts to remind everyone, including their enemies, of their power and magnificence. When you are in the presence of enemies, God is with you, an unseen Presence who showers you with a feast of love

and courage. There's something else for you to ponder, on page 3. This question is: **When I am afraid of the future, which words from Psalm 23 can reassure me that God is always with me?** Take a moment and reread one of the translations of this psalm and look for the language of reassurance, of comfort, of the constancy of God. Or read the words of the Sending Out Song on page 4: "When we fear the future, give to us Your grace." [PAUSE]

One of the ministry teams here at church is the Lay Leadership Development Team. This team prayerfully (actually why don't you look at page 5 of the worship program and read the box that says "We are the Church" while I tell you about it?) This ministry team does our best to match the needs of all of our ministries with the spiritual gifts, skills, and abilities of our faith-community. We're not a big congregation but we are blessed with amazingly gifted and creative people who are willing to serve. One of the reasons to serve is to help teach the language of faith to someone who's never heard it.

One of the ministry teams we might create in the new year is for *Messy Church*. It would take a team of people to create, once a month, activities and meals and community, for people who are not "churched", who might not have any idea that there's a Good Shepherd chasing them with love and kindness. *Messy Church* doesn't look like church as we know it. It's something different. It's Christian spirituality heard and spoken in a different language. At the *Messy Church* conference I heard a testimony from a young woman who reluctantly said yes to being part of a *Messy Church* team at her church. She and her husband were not church goers but their children liked *Messy Church*, and their family came to know a new language of faith. One of my heart's desires is that we create and support ministry that welcomes and includes and engages

people of all ages, and teaches them about this God we know, and love, and trust, who is the Good Shepherd.

Eugene Peterson's translation praises this Good Shepherd, saying, "You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing". Isn't it a blessing and a gift to be part of the Body of Christ? This is a place where we're known and loved; where we're given opportunities to experience and express Christ's love; where we discover our call to ministry to serve God, and to serve this world that God so loves. Thank You Jesus! It is God's desire that our cup brims with blessings. The last space on page 3 of the worship program asks: **How often do I thank God that "my cup brims with blessings"?** Take a moment to ponder, and maybe to begin the list, the overflowing cup of your blessings, given to you by the Good Shepherd. [PAUSE]

The 23rd Psalm uses wonderful and inviting language, whichever translation is used, to share God's love and kindness and tenderness with those who don't know this Good Shepherd. Lord, teach us to speak in the heart-languages of those who aren't here.... who aren't going to walk through these doors... but whose souls hunger and thirst, as ours do, to know Your love. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.