



**From the Pulpit: July 25, 2021**  
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:25

*How to Love the World Again, I: Presence*

A Psalm of David.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;*

*he leads me beside still waters;*

*he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths*

*for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the  
darkest valley,*

*I fear no evil;*

*for you are with me;*

*your rod and your staff—*

*they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me*

*in the presence of my enemies;*

*you anoint my head with oil;*

*my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall fol-  
low me*

*all the days of my life,*

*and I shall dwell in the house of the  
Lord*

*my whole life long.*

“Psalm 23 was still  
mortared among  
the neurons of their  
declining cognition.  
Maybe it will be true  
for you as well—the  
last words you’ll  
ever remember.”

It wasn't an easy task. A preacher needs a congregation to hear and understand what he's saying, and most of that congregation were too afflicted with dementia and memory loss to understand the message I was trying to share. You kind of preach to the few people in the room of sound mind—the nurses' aides, the chaplain, the personal caretakers who push the wheelchairs.

One time I took my turn and chose Psalm 23 as my scripture text. As soon as I started reciting the text, most of the congregation spontaneously joined my recitation. Almost every one. That was not my plan. The Psalm was not printed in a bulletin for them to read. They just knew it. They just remembered it.

It was so moving. Some of the people in that room had forgotten the names of their own children, but Psalm 23 was still mortared among the neurons of their declining cognition. Maybe it will be true for

you as well—the last words you'll ever remember.

I Peter 2:25

*For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have  
returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*

Psalm 23 is a vivid, pictorial, concise masterpiece of only 114 words, but it may be the most repeated passage in the history of literature, or maybe it's second after The Lord's Prayer. One Bible scholar said that Psalm 23 is to the Bible what your putter is to your golf bag—the most important tool in your collection.<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Town of Greenwich, Connecticut, owns a wonderful long-term care facility. There's a memory unit in this facility, and every Wednesday local preachers would take turns leading a worship service in the Chapel.

<sup>1</sup> Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Psalm 23," *Working Preacher*, March 26, 2017.

The putter is the humblest but most indispensable club in the bag. I use my driver maybe 15 times in 18 holes, and each individual iron even fewer times, but I use my putter at least three times every hole, 54 times in a round, sometimes more. The putter is small but critical. It gets us home. Psalm 23 is small but critical. It gets us home.

In his little letter to the first Christian Churches of the first century, St. Peter takes Shepherd Boy David's perfect metaphor of the Shepherd God and runs with it, "For you were all going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your lives." St. Peter doubles up on the shepherd metaphor, "Shepherd and Guardian," he says, the same image from a slightly different angle. "The Lord is my Guardian."

How's that for a timely word from the Lord on the weekend when the Cleveland baseball team announces its new moniker. Don't you think that's a wonderful mascot: Guardians? It rhymes with Indians. You take away the I-N from Indian, add G-U-A-R instead, and you get Guardians.

Katie and Christine and I dreamed up this sermon series because we needed it, and we thought you might need it too. Someone said Psalm 23 was a psalm that was made for terror.<sup>2</sup> He wrote that on April 16, 2013, the day after the Boston Marathon Bombing. I wonder if Google searches of "Psalm 23" skyrocketed on September 11, 2001.

For Shepherd Boy David, terror took the form of a wolf prowling on the edges of his flock, or the shrinking watering hole, or the green pastures burning up in a blistering heat wave. The Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Sheep are among God's most vulnerable creatures. They have one defense mechanism—flocking. A sheep without a flock is a goner, and a flock without a shepherd doesn't exist. Sheep as we know them were genetically engineered by humans eons ago for milk, meat, and wool. If we stopped guarding them, they would go extinct almost instantly.

For David, the terror was a dangerous predator. For us the possibilities are almost too many to count. In 2016, the River Ahr in Germany experienced a 100-year flood. The flood waters rose to 12 feet. Five years after the 100-year flood, there was a 500-year flood. The waters rose to 32 feet.<sup>3</sup> You saw the images.

It might be a bit of an exaggeration to call a pandemic a terror, but not much. Mental disorders increased 50% during the pandemic. Suicidal thoughts among teenagers doubled.<sup>4</sup>

This week I learned about one of the many almost invisible impacts of the pandemic. Oxford University Press published its first book in 1478. That's 28 years after The Gutenberg Press was first invented. Oxford's book business has been declining for years, but the pandemic hammered

home the last nail in the coffin. In August the Press will shut down for good after 543 years.<sup>5</sup> I was just disconsolate; I have dozens of essential, erudite books from Oxford in my library. My **Bible** was printed by Oxford University Press. Now just gone. A 543-year-old house could not survive COVID-19.

"St. Peter doubles up on the shepherd metaphor, 'Shepherd and Guardian,' he says, the same image from a slightly different angle. 'The Lord is my Guardian.'"

<sup>3</sup> Loveday Morris and Júlia Ledur, "On One Street in Germany's Floods: Terror, Survival, Tragedy and the House That Floated Away," *The Washington Post*, 2021-07-23.

<sup>4</sup> Reported by *Scientific American*, June 15, 2021. Cited by *The Christian Century*, "Century Marks," July 14, 2021, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> "Century Marks," *The Christian Century*, July 14, 2021, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Thompson, "The 23rd Psalm in an Age of Terror: A Pastoral Response to Boston," *Political Theology*, April 16, 2013.

In the time of terror or in the time of virus, a tiny poem-prayer like Psalm 23 is scant comfort. And yet the importance of the image of God as Shepherd is just incalculable over the centuries. There's no way to exaggerate how thoroughly this almost childish little prayer-poem has shaped our common thinking about the Creator.

Whatever you're going through, I invite you to pray this poem-prayer made for terror, because it gives us just the right balance of hopefulness and realism. We will still walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but we will not walk alone. The rod and the staff of the Lord goeth before.

After the Twin Towers came down 20 years ago, Frederick Buechner wrote:

When horrors happen, we can't use God to make them unhappen any more than we can use a flashlight to put out a fire or Psalm 23 to find our way home in the dark. All we can do is to draw close to God and to each other as best we can, the way those stunned New Yorkers did, and hope that, although God may well be useless when all hell breaks loose, there is nothing that happens, not even hell, where God is not present with us and for us.<sup>6</sup>

I've shared this story with you before, but it's sustained me so many times in so many ways that it bears repeating. It's from the great American scholar Reynolds Price. Dr. Price was the James B. Duke Professor of English at Duke University. I think it is safe to say that Duke University would allow only a distinguished scholar to sit in the Duke Chair at Duke University.

In 1984 when he was 50 years old, Dr. Price suddenly encountered difficulty walking. At the University Hospital, they discovered a ten-inch, pencil-thick tumor intricately braided through the core of his spinal cord. The magicians at Duke cured the cancer with surgery and radiation, but Dr. Price was wheel-chair bound for the next 27 years till he died in 2011.

During and after his illness, he wrote eloquently about his experience of pain, and he received, hundreds, thousands, of letters from people who would share their own experiences with him, including one from a woman who was going through some exhausting medical tests.

She had this dream, or this vision, or this...experience, I guess you could call it.

She said, "I went out along the Galilean hills and came to a crowd gathered around a man, and I stood on the outskirts intending to listen. But he looked over the crowd at me and said, "What do you want?" I said, "Could you send someone to come with me and help me stand up after the tests, because I can't manage alone?" He thought for a minute and then said, "How would it be if

"Whatever you're going through, I invite you to pray this poem-prayer made for terror, because it gives us just the right balance of hopefulness and realism."

I came?"<sup>7</sup>

*...how often we feel we're being watched over,  
or that we're secretly looking in on the ones  
we love, even when they are far away,  
or even as they are lost in the sleep*

*no one wakes from—<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds Price, *Letter To A Man In The Fire* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 30–31.

<sup>8</sup> David Graham, "Listening for Your Name," in *How to Love the World—Poems of Gratitude and Hope*, ed. James Crews (North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2021), p. 33

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Buechner, "Disaster," <https://www.frederick-buechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/28/disaster>.

**—Prayers of the People—**  
**By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

You, who sees all,  
You, who bears the world,  
You who is heard in all the world,  
be our blessing.

Be the ground of our being,  
the depth of our reality,  
the beyond in our midst.

Be for us ultimate mystery,  
absolute future,  
searcher of hearts.

Dwell with us in the hidden places.  
Understand the strangest fears  
that punctuate our day and night.

Hear our surrender,  
the rise and fall of our breath,  
the unpretentious revelation that  
“all will be well, and all will be well,  
and all manner of things will be well.”  
(Julian of Norwich)

Hear us as we whisper to you,  
howl and roll on through the dissolving day.

Be with us in the blue blur of morning,  
and the swelling force of company, friendship, family.

Be with us, the gravitational pull of love and longing  
made visible as we navigate what is said and unsayable.

Be with us as we step onto escalators and moving  
sidewalks,  
slide into elevators and duck into sedans,  
the trappings of public life revealing  
the dual joy and exhaustion of a life well lived.

Be with us as we posture and pivot,  
unable to recalibrate to a regular rhythm.  
Let the blue embers of love tie us together,  
a rush of justice, mercy, charity, kindness surging  
as we wield your ever-present calling for the sake of  
others.

Make visible your love, and the love between us,  
so that with hope we might be made whole.  
Let us taste and see such palpable love.  
Let us sit at your table, indisputably fed.  
Let us linger together, measurably changed.

O Living God, Friend of the World, Merciful One,  
be with us.

O Rock, Redeemer, our true home, be with us.  
And hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us  
saying...