

**Psalm 23**

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 follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.

**Afraid of Crowds?  
Rev. Charles Schuster  
October 7, 2007**

It's an exciting day for us at the church for a number of reasons, one of which is that Warren McConnell, Reverend McConnell, and Jim Cowell, Reverend Cowell, and other members of our church are in Wellington today for the beginning of the first Wellington Fellowship. It's happening today, and it comes from our congregation, and we hope it goes well, and we'll support them as best we can. This is their first Sunday. I'd like to offer a prayer – let us pray.

Be with all those people from our church and from that area up north. May they sense your presence and know that they are part of the Body of Christ. Amen.

A number of years ago, Art Linkletter wrote a book entitled *Kids Say the Darnedest Things*. I receive e-mail from church members, and letters, helping me with sermons, some of which I can use and some that I can't, or shouldn't. But I received an e-mail from a member of the church, it was about things that children say and the way children think. Someone asked eight-year-old Derrick how a stranger can tell if two people are married, and he said, "Well, you might have to guess based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids." Someone asked eight-year-old Laurie what she thought her mom and dad might have in common, and she said, "Both of them don't want any more

children.” Lynette was asked what most people do on a date, and this eight-year-old said, “Dates are for having fun, and people should get to know each other. Even boys have something to say if you listen long enough.” And someone asked seven-year-old Pam, when is it okay to kiss somebody? And she said, “When they’re rich.”

Kids say the darnedest things, but not only kids. I was in a church, obviously not this one, where the custodian had this philosophy because he would say it often, “This church would be great if it weren’t for the people.” And I’ve heard parents say, and I think they’re serious when they say that “There’s a problem with that school. Our son just doesn’t make good grades because he’s bored.” I think it was Yogi Berra who said, “The reason I go to other people’s funerals is because if I don’t, then when I die, they won’t come to mine.” I know it was Yogi Berra who said, “Why buy luggage, you only use it when you travel.” And it was Yogi who said, “A nickel ain’t worth a dime any more.”

I bought a book a couple weeks ago, I bought it strictly for the title. I didn’t understand the title. The title of the book – *Don’t Shoot the Horse Until You Learn to Drive the Tractor*. I’ve read the book since I bought it, and I don’t understand it either. People say the darnedest things. One thing I hear all the time, and I understand it, sort of, but I don’t, altogether, but I do, in a way... You’ll see what I mean when I tell you. People will say, “I’m very religious, but I don’t go to church.” I understand that. What does it mean to be religious, and do you have to go to church? And if you don’t have to go to church to be religious, what in the world are we doing here? What is the role of religion? What is the task of the church, and how do we practice our faith? Is the church important? Is being here a good thing? Those are questions for us today on this World Communion Sunday.

Let me begin with something I think we all believe. I think we do. Religion is personal. I think we all agree to that, or most of us. Alfred North Whitehead was a great philosopher and theologian. Before that, he was a mathematician until he turned ninety, and then he became a philosopher and theologian. Some people said he became senile, and therefore he became a philosopher and theologian. I don’t think that’s right. He taught that religion is what you do in your own solitariness. Religion is personal. The Psalmist knew that, the first part of that Psalm said “The Lord is my shepherd,” that beautiful passage, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The Twenty-Third Psalm. Theologians describe God as personal, even theologians. Sheila Davaney, teaches at Iliff School of Theology, for her, God is that force, that power, that presence that is liberating in an oppressive world. Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian, speaks of God as found in loving relationships, what he calls I-Thou relationships. Annie Dillard thought of, “Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there. God is in beauty.” But we experience it personally.

Some time ago I was asked to teach in the United Methodist Women’s School of Christian Missions. My subject was Israel/Palestine. I’d been lined up to teach three times, and last weekend was the final of the three sessions for me to teach. Margaret Hotse, who’s a member of our church and probably is here glaring at me right now, was one of the ones in charge of the classes, and I suspect it was she who got me into this. The class last Saturday, not yesterday but a week ago, was held in Walden, Colorado.

That's the same place that the senior bus tour is headed toward. Walden, Colorado is two and a half hours away – that's if you have a fast car. Two Sundays ago when I asked Margaret how many had signed up for my class, she said there were five women who had signed up, and I asked would they consider canceling it? Five people, at two and a half hours one way, that's five hours for five people, that's an hour a person. And I said I didn't think I wanted to drive five hours for five people, in the mountains, on a Saturday in late September, and she said she understood. When I got home from church that day, I said to Kathy, hoping to be supported in my disdain for that suggested task, "You know what they expected me to do? There is no end to their expectations. Five hours, five people, driving in the mountains. I'd have to get up before I'd even see the sun and come back while it was dark. How over the edge is that?" I expected sympathy. I thought, spousal concern. We've been married thirty-eight years. She's never done this to me before. She looked at me and said two things. She said, "What would Jesus do?" and I said, "That's easy. He can't drive." And then she said, "What about all those sermons you preach about the importance of every person?"

So I went. Five hours. But the number was wrong. One of the women heard I was coming and switched over to Margaret's class. She had fifteen people in her class. Some hunter had shot up a transformer, thinking it was an elk. There was no power in the church when I got there. There was no light, there was no heat, it was cold. Later on when the power came back on, one of the florescent lights began to smoke and flames came out in the class. I took that as a sign. It was five hours for four people, and it was worth every minute. It was a very rich experience for me, and I hope for them. People got to talk about God in their lives. "God was there, when my husband died and I didn't think I could take another step," she said. "God was there when I had open-heart surgery," she said, "and you know what? My soul was calm." "God was there when I got a divorce, and the whole town turned against me, and I didn't think I could make it," she said. "God was there when I met my husband. I kid you not," she said. "I put an ad in the paper, and when I met him, I knew it was the right person. And God was there." Personal God. The Lord is my shepherd.

Friday I had my eyes tested. I have cataracts. I like to call them Cadillacs, it's as close as I'll get to a luxury car. And I have a drooping eyelid. Both of them droop. It's getting harder and harder for me to keep my eye on the people in the balcony in the sanctuary, and those people need to be watched. The reason I know that is, I was up there last Sunday. So they put these drops in your eyes, and it takes a little time for them to kick in, and the nurse led me by the hand to a chair in the hallway, and said to me, "Reverend, I'm going to put you here until your pupils are dilated. It's a little like basting a turkey. We'll come and get you when you're done." And I thought, and told her so, that I thought that was perhaps a bad analogy, they turkey thing, that is. And so I'm in this chair and I can't see much, and I'm sitting beside this man who's younger than I am, but most people are, and he said to me, "My name is Maurice. So you're a Reverend. You know, Reverend, the world's going to hell. Nobody has any values, everybody's out for themselves, but I got God on my side. God rules my life. I don't need the church." And I said, "Good for you, Maurice. Your religion's got something going for you that works. Now, the church to which I'm appointed is on the corner of Elizabeth and Stover. We

could use a little help over there. With your attitude, why don't you come on over and see us some time and help us out." Maybe he will. Maybe he's here. Religion is personal.

Cindy Guthrie Ryan is a hospice nurse. She talks about one of her patients. "I visited this woman. She was ninety-four years old. She was near the end of her life. That's what I do. There's a routine I go through, and I've done it. We talked about life and death issues, whether she was afraid, was she at peace that the end of her life was coming, and toward the end of our visit I said, "Shall we pray before I go?" and she said, "Sure," and I took her hand and closed my eyes and opened my mouth to pray, and before my first word emerged she took my hand tightly, and she started to pray. And she prayed for my children and my ministry and she prayed that I might be close to God and faithful and helping people see God, and she prayed for my husband and my marriage, and then she said Amen. And I was surprised by that prayer. It took my breath away. It touched me deeply. I looked into her eyes and there was a twinkle of life, new life. Her spirit was dancing, and she said, "I just love to talk to God."

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. How personal is this? It's where religion begins. It's personal. The reason we come to the altar the first Sunday of every month, every one of us has the opportunity to receive the bread and the cup, every one of us to be reminded of how Jesus served each disciple, and how communion is served to each of us who will receive it. It's personal. But there's more to religion, I think. The public side of it, it's for people who aren't afraid of crowds. It's public religion, for people who know that religion is personal, but that's the starting point.

In the Twenty-Third Psalm, there's something surprising at the end of it. It's a very personal poem, or liturgy, which is how it was used. But at the end, there's an interesting twist. As it begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," it ends, "Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Scholars have noted how that part of the psalm differs from the rest of it. To dwell in the house of the Lord forever is to be connected to a community of faith, it's public religion. The Interpreter's Bible scholar Clinton McCann says "To be in the house of the Lord as it is stated in the Twenty-Third Psalm provides a communal dimension to a psalm that is usually heard as exclusively individualistic. Personal assurance articulated by the psalmist is finally experienced in the community of God's people."

Bill Coffin, visiting with a college student, talking about religion. The student had decided to go back to church. Coffin, pastor at Riverside Church said to him, "Tom, I'm glad you decided to go back to church. Let me tell you at least a suggestion. Put yourself in the way of beauty. Soak in the anthems, the hymns. Soak in the prayers, the sermons." Madeleine L'Engle said it this way: "I have a point of view. You have a point of view. But God has view." The church is the place to think about the difference. Public worship expands our point of view until we begin to glimpse the view.

This time of year I always think of Steve Bartmann. Bartmann lived in Chicago. He was a Chicago Cubs baseball fan. The Cubs think they have a curse. It involves a farmer and a

horse or a mule or something. They think because of the curse they never can win. They always lose. Except four years ago, and they were in the playoffs this year. The Cubs were in this championship series, and they were playing the Florida Marlins. All they needed was one more game to win. All they needed was one more out, and there was a ball hit to left field. It was foul, but it was catchable, and their left fielder, Cub left fielder Moises Alou was ready to catch the ball. Moises Alou was going to lead them to the promised land. All he had to do was catch the ball. Bartmann, who was a Cub fan, just couldn't help himself. He was a participatory soul. Unfortunately, he'd brought his glove to the game, and he was sitting right there on the edge in the first row, best seat in the house, and he reached over and caught the ball that Moises Alou should have caught, and the Marlins went on to win the game and went on to win the series. It took a police escort to get Bartmann out of Wrigley Field. Armed police guarded his home, and I don't know where he lives today, but I'm guessing it's not anywhere in Illinois. And I'm guessing it could be Florida, actually. I'm guessing if he still lives in the vicinity, he was not at Wrigley Field in the recent playoffs. I'd bet a lot of money on that. By the way, they lost again. Here's the thing. You can be kicked out of Wrigley Field for dropping a ball that you should have caught, or for catching a ball you should have left alone. But in the church is a place where after you drop the ball, they remind you you're still in the game. Church is the place where you and I gather with a crowd, and then discover that we've become part of a congregation. There's a big difference.

Diane Butler Bass, in her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, says that the church reminds us what our journey is about, for Christianity for the rest of us is transformative Christianity and transforming Christianity. In other words, public religion is for those who have joined in the effort to build a better world and a better church, while at the same time we're working on that, we're working on ourselves, to become a better person. We're not perfect. Public worship reminds us that we've got work to do on ourselves. We don't know it all, and public worship raises the possibility that there are other ways to see and other things to consider, till we come to a point that, looking back, we really see we've learned a lot. We have doctrine, and we know that, but public worship helps us look at our dogma and can save us from becoming dogmatic. Because while we may have blessed assurance that we know all the answers, we'd better have a little humility with it. People "holier than thou," aren't, and they annoy God. Public worship invites us to look at what is called "the impenetrable darkness of the world gone wrong with the indescribable light of the gospel that is not afraid of any night." Public worship takes the hopelessness of death and repeats the message of Easter that says, "You know, the only thing about graves that's important is, where's the stone, and how do we roll it away?"

When you join the Elks Club they give you a secret handshake and tell you you're in. When you've voted into PEO, you learn the secret code that you can't even tell your husband, and they put a lapel pin on your jersey and tell you you're blessed. When you join the church, they throw you in the water, or sprinkle water on your head to wake you up. And then they give you a thimble full of grape juice and a piece of broken bread and tell you you just had a banquet. And then they tell you to get out there in the world and do something good. Public worship – we will dwell in the house of the Lord. We will own our incompleteness and work toward being whole. We will ask our questions till

we're blue in the face or until we run into somebody who's already asked some of those questions and who's found some of those answers, so we can ask better questions. James Galway is a world-class flute player because he had to be. He learned to play the flute when the worms attacked his violin. He grew from what he was and became what he never imagined he could be. That's how it is for us. That's why public worship is important. It reminds us, when the worms attack our violin, to pick up another instrument and continue playing the music. It encourages us, when we think we know it all, to stretch our minds and grow until we know some more. It supports us when our heart is breaking so bad that no words will help, only a hug, or a hymn, or an anthem, or a sermon that somebody can preach to the heart. And each month, on the first Sunday, we come to the altar to receive the bread and the cup and hear someone say to us, personally but publicly, to all of us together, "Now you are the body of Christ." Public worship, when it's all said and done, has the power to get us so we'll hear it – you are the body of Christ. And in public worship, to be told, "Since you are the body of Christ, when you leave this place, go out there and act like it."