

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Lord is Our Shepherd: Slowing Down”
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Psalm 23; Matthew 5:1-10

It was right there. It was right there in front of me. I could not believe it. Each time I went to the hospital to visit someone I would stop by the gift shop, wondering if it might be there. But it never was. This time it was. Shining like a beacon in the night; like the Holy Grail. It was Peace Bear Beanie Baby for which I had been searching. Let me pause for a moment. I was not a Beanie Baby collector, but my pre-adolescent daughter loved them. And so my job as her dad was to find the rarest ones I could find to add to her collection. This Peace Bear was rare and greatly coveted. It would make the perfect Christmas present and give her a sense of fulfillment, that she had a bear few others possessed. Shortly after this, Christmas came, she opened the box and was thrilled, until she opened her other gifts and Peace Bear took his place on the floor of her bedroom. Eventually Peace Bear and all the others got bagged up and forgotten about. So much for making my hopes and dreams of what that might mean.

We human beings are funny creatures. Unlike animals that simply need to eat, sleep and mate, we are seldom satisfied with what we have, but we are always scanning the horizon for something to give our lives meaning. That will complete us. That will make us whole. That will cause us to cease seeking and be content. The things we scan the horizon for believing that they will complete us are almost limitless. So here is a partial list. See if yours is on here: a certain phone, a certain car, a certain job, a certain salary, a certain person, a certain house, a certain experience, a certain trip, a certain camera, a certain grade, a certain boss, a certain employee, a certain company, a certain body shape, a certain hair color, a certain pet, a certain...and I guess you get my drift. We are always looking out there for that next thing that will accomplish within us what we thought all these things could do but didn't; to satisfy our inner longing. But what if I told you this morning that there is something that could satisfy that inner longing...and that something is not out there...but back there? That it is not ahead of us, but behind us?

To understand this, we first need to return to the 23rd Psalm and realize that the writer believes that it is possible to find this peace and fulfillment. This is what he means when he writes, *“And I shall dwell in the House of the Lord Forever.”* This is a dual reference. First it is to the Tent of Meeting. The tent of meeting was the tent that held the Ark of the Covenant and the Altar. It was the place where God came and met God's people. Thus, to live in God's house forever was to remind people that they and God could dwell together in complete unity...thus bringing completeness. The second reference was to the Garden of Eden. In the Garden, which was God's creation and residence, human beings were able to live in intimate and complete

relationship with God. Thus again, living in God's house forever was to be like living in Eden in close proximity to the living God. This meant for them, and for us, that it is possible to live with God in such a way that we find the peace we so desperately seek.

Secondly the Psalmist tells us that he can find his way to the house of God. He does so by slowing down and letting God catch him. I say this because the writer tells us that God is pursuing him, desiring to give him what he needs to enter God's presence. We can see this in the phrase, "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*" We can see it there because "follow" does not mean follow, in the sense we usually use it; as in my dog is following me. It means instead to pursue; as a hunter pursues its prey. In other words, God is pursuing the Psalmist, desiring to give him the blessings and the mercy that will make possible an intimate relationship with God; that will let him live in the house of the lord forever; that will make him whole. God is pursuing him with an invitation to live in God's presence and be filled with God's love and grace. The same is true for us; that what fills and completes us is not out there, but is seeking us, and all we must do is to slow down and let God catch us.

In many ways these last few verses draw together the entire Psalm. They remind us that whether we are sheep or shepherds, God cares and provides for us. They remind us that God's desire is that we be made whole and complete; be made into the human beings as God leads us beside still waters and green pasture. These verses remind us that God desires to live with us; that God does not want to farm us out to other shepherds. Finally, they remind us that we are valued and valuable enough for God to chase after us that we might be made whole. With all of that in mind I want to offer you a cumulative challenge. I challenge you to take your bulletin home, cut out the 23rd Psalm and then at least once a week, spend half an hour with it; spend half an hour, without television, or phone or children...which I know is hard, and read and contemplate the love that is here. Then be still and allow God's love to catch you, bless you and enfold you, as you live in the house of the Lord forever.