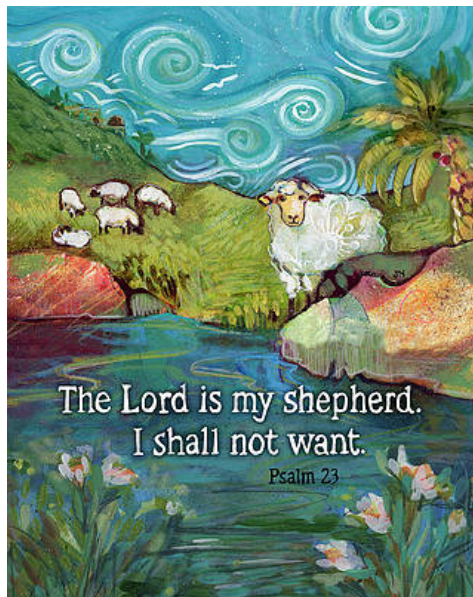


**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am**

April 30, 2023

**The Rev Dr Scott Couper
Fourth Sunday after Easter**

**“The Divine Shepherd”
Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 23**



Credit: Jen Norton

Psalm 23 is a scripture that almost everyone knows. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ...”(23:1). Everyone can almost recite it, even if they are not Christian or a person of faith. The psalm is ubiquitously used, and thus hackneyed, for funeral and memorial scenes in films and television. Psalm 23 is considered to include some of the most beautiful prose in the English language.

“The most widely recognized version of the psalm in English today is undoubtedly drawn from the King James Bible published in 1611”.¹

What is interesting about the 23rd psalm is that despite the fact that it speaks of death, persecution, suffering, and evil, it nonetheless brings great comfort to me and to all those that hear it. The author, ascribed to be King David, was hunted, pursued by enemies, by evil, and even death. “Even though I walk through the shadow of death...”, or ‘evil’, depending on the translation (23:4). Yet the weight of the psalm is found in its beginning and conclusion – with ‘green pastures’ and ‘still waters’ (23:2) and with ‘goodness’ and ‘love’ (23:6).

Within the Christian tradition there is a long history of embracing that which is seemingly morbid to bring wisdom, peace, assurance, and even joy to followers. Psalm 23, like the cross (an instrument of torture and capital punishment as well as hope and eternal life), is paradoxical. I have quoted Richard Rohr many times before. He understands that the ability to hold paradox, ‘a seeming contradiction’, is one of the key tenets of spiritual wisdom. Rohr once wrote, “Psychological wholeness and spiritual wholeness *never exclude the*

¹ Psalm 23, Wikipedia, found at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_23#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20most%20popular,King%20James%20Bible%20\(1611\).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_23#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20most%20popular,King%20James%20Bible%20(1611).), accessed April 30, 2023.

problem from the solution. If it is wholeness, then it is always paradoxical, and holds the dark and the light sides of things”.²

I perhaps learned this lesson of paradox, and applied it to my own contemplation of life and death, when I was on a tour through the streets of a medieval town in Germany. On so many doors and signs there were odd, almost macabre, symbols of death. I asked our tour guide what was the meaning of all these signs. Our guide shared with us that the images around town evoked the Latin phrase *Memento Mori*: ‘Remember you must die’ or ‘remember that you will die’. “A basic *memento mori* painting would be a portrait with a skull but other symbols commonly found are hourglasses or clocks, extinguished or guttering candles, fruit (fermenting), and flowers”.³

The author Jacqueline Rose explained how the motto *memento mori* helps us live. She explained that as we contemplate death, we have two alternatives: pretending to be immortal or “being honest with ourselves and taking a minute to admit that we will die can actually help us live richer, fuller lives.”⁴ In short, she

² From *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, in goodreads, “Falling Upward Quotes”, found at: <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/14857469-falling-upward-a-spirituality-for-the-two-halves-of-life?page=9#:~:text=%E2%80%9Cpsychological%20wholeness%20and%20spiritual%20holiness,and%20light%20sides%20of%20things.%E2%80%9D>, accessed April 30, 2023.

³ TATE, “Art Term: *Memento Mori*” found at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/memento-mori>, accessed April 30, 2023.,

⁴ Jacqueline Roe, “*Memento Mori*: How Remembering Our Death Helps Us Live”, in *Grotto*, found at: <https://grottonetwork.com/keep-the-faith/belief/what-memento-mori-can-teach/>, accessed April 30, 2023.

confided that *remembering our deaths* teaches us about living life. There is the paradox! *Remembering* your death enables you to live your life better. *Memento Mori* can remind us to chase our dreams; it can help us decide with whom we want to spend time; it can teach us to appreciate the moment.

Many of our youth understand the ancient wisdom found in Psalm 23 and in the medieval streets of Germany. Yesterday at the Annual Meeting of the Vermont Conference, I spoke with a colleague minister who has two teenage sons. She was relating to me that her two sons use an app called ‘WeCroak’ on their I-phones. The ‘WeCroak’ app is inspired by a Bhutanese folk saying: “To be a happy person, one must contemplate death five times daily”. Each day, the app sends a recipient five invitations to stop and think about death. The invitations come at random times and at any moment, just like death.⁵ The youth do not see these messages as morbid, but rather inspiring. With the daily reminders about their own death, they cease to waste their time and they live their life to the fullest.

Of course, as a person of faith, *Memento Mori* is made all the more powerful and influential with the trust and assurance that God created me, God wants me to live my life abundantly, and, whether I live or die, I belong to God who loves me. This is the promise of the Divine Shepherd that David speaks of in

⁵ WeCoak, found at: <https://www.wecroak.com/#:~:text=The%20WeCroak%20app%20is%20inspired,any%20moment%2C%20just%20like%20death.>, accessed April 30, 2023

Psalm 23. The promise is that that no matter the hardship, persecution, suffering, and death experienced, one is ultimately led to green pastures, quiet waters, and to a table. One is granted restoration, comfort, an overflowing cup, and goodness forever. The Divine Shepherd grants that I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I would like all in our church family this morning to pray for Adelaide Minott and her family. Adelaide is receiving hospice care at her home in Guilford. While visiting her for the past two weeks, I have learned how well this woman has done in all aspects of life: vocation, marriage, child rearing, community development, and service to the faith community here at Centre Church. Adelaide's daughters have shared with me that her life has been one of sacrifice for others. That sacrifice is appreciated by those closest to her. All of her children and grandchildren have visited her to say their goodbyes. Though Adelaide is walking through the 'shadow of death', she is comforted by her family and by her Creator, the Divine Shepherd.

Jesus taught and demonstrated the paradox of life and death cannot be experienced without the other – in fact they both foster one another. Jesus also taught and demonstrated that suffering and sacrifice is a part of life and should not be feared nor even avoided. Lastly, Jesus taught, like 'WeCroak', that we do not know the day or the hour. This realization should inspire us, not depress us, to

live to our fullest God-given potential! From the gospel of Matthew, we read: “Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life [...]. Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done’” (Matthew 16:21-28).

David’s 23rd psalm, Jesus, medieval Germany, the ‘WeCroak’ app, and the life of integrity and dignity that Adelaide has led all remind us that though we “walk in the shadow of death”, we have the Divine Shepherd with whom to dwell forever (Psalm 23:6).

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.