

## COMFORT IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, October 7, 2018  
based on Psalm 23:4b; II Corinthians 1:3–7**

The sermon this morning is the continuation of a sermon series on the twenty third Psalm, entitled, “Beside Still Waters.” So far we have considered the first part of the Psalm, which portrays God as a shepherd, who leads us to green pastures and still waters and who will lead us even through the valley of the shadow of death. Today we move into a section in the psalm where the imagery may seem to us more obscure; yet as we explore the full import of these verses, we will find that they also speak powerfully to the soul. This morning we focus on the latter part of verse four, which says, “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” {prayer}

In this short phrase there is one word that likely jumps out at us—the word “comfort”—because although in our day we enjoy a great deal of material comforts, there is much in our world that can bring us considerable discomfort. The Brett Kavanaugh hearings have made everyone in America uncomfortable, no matter what side of the aisle you are on. Politics in general in our country these days are a source of enormous discomfort, as we see so much division and rancor on all sides; and the discomfort certainly is amplified when we look at the world at large, and see major strife and looming threats, from terrorism to rising autocracies to the dangers of global warming. Then of course the discomfort gets personal when we are dealing with health troubles and pains, or conflicts in our relationships, or personal trials, or nagging uncertainties in life.

In the face of all that, Psalm 23 speaks of comfort. The Hebrew word translated as “comfort,” is the word *nacham* נָחַם, which appears at numerous memorable places in the Old Testament, such as the beginning of Isaiah chapter 40, in words put to music in the Messiah: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.” (Isaiah 40:1) The word *nacham* has the root meaning of drawing a deep breath, or being able to breathe freely. Surely this is one of our deepest spiritual needs—in the face of all that assails and troubles us, to be able to breathe free, to be at peace, to find comfort.

So where exactly can we find such comfort? Psalm 23 says that we will find comfort in the Shepherd’s rod and staff. Once again, as we have seen throughout the Psalm, David provides us with imagery drawn from the life of the Biblical shepherd. The shepherd’s staff is a familiar image; I used a shepherd’s staff as the image for the children’s sermon over the past several weeks at the 10:30 hour. The staff was a long pole, typically with a crook at the end. The Hebrew word for “staff” is *misheneth* מִשְׁנֵת; it comes from a verb meaning “to support”; and indeed the Biblical shepherd would often lean on the staff, using it as a kind of walking stick. But the staff was a tool that the shepherd principally used for the benefit of the sheep. The shepherd would guide sheep with the staff, tapping on the sheep or pressing the lower part of the staff against the sheep to direct them in the right way; and the shepherd

would use the staff to rescue sheep that had gotten stuck in brambles or had fallen into a hole. The crook at the top end of the staff was designed to be able grab under a sheep's leg so as to pull the sheep out of trouble.

But while the staff was ideal for guiding sheep or rescuing sheep, it was not so useful if the shepherd needed to protect the sheep from predators. Here is where the second item comes in. Psalm 23 speaks not only of a staff but of a rod; there are two completely different Hebrew words used here. The rod is the Hebrew word שֵׁטֶט *shevet*, which basically means a club. A *shevet* was generally about 30 inches long, with a tapered handle, and a knobbed end. Sometimes bits of metal or stone were embedded into the round end; the shepherd used the rod to clobber any predator that threatened the sheep.

Phillip Keller, who wrote a commentary on the 23rd Psalm from the perspective of a shepherd, spoke of seeing shepherd boys years ago in the Middle East actually making these kinds of rods or clubs, and learning to throw them with considerable accuracy. He also spoke of being with some Masai shepherds in Africa (he lived in east Africa for some time) who were using these kinds of shepherd's rods; they were moving along with their sheep when at one point they came upon a cobra that was curled, ready to strike. With lightning speed a young shepherd hammered the snake with his club, putting a quick end to the threat. The shepherd's rod was an instrument for the defense of the sheep.

The rod also could be used to guide the sheep, much like the staff in that respect; and it was used for the care of the sheep. There was an ancient Hebrew expression, "passing under the rod," which referred to how shepherds would examine their sheep by bringing them under their rod and using the rod to push back the sheep's wool to look for diseases or parasites or wounds in the sheep.

All this imagery says to us something very important about God. Often people think of God as a nebulous and distant figure, who is viewing us from afar. But when David in Psalm 23 says that God is like a shepherd, he is saying that God is intimately and actively engaged with us. God is here to help us when we are in trouble, to rescue us when we get ourselves ensnared in difficulty, to defend us in the face of threats, and to guide us in the right way. The rod and staff image tells us that God is a God of power and of compassion, and that God is at work for our benefit. We can find comfort—genuine comfort—when we place ourselves under the care and guidance of the Shepherd.

Our understanding of the imagery in Psalm 23 can also help to illuminate some other Scripture teachings. Consider, for example, Proverbs 13:24—"Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them." From this verse we get the saying, "spare the rod and spoil the child." Often in history this has been understood to mean that children need to be beaten if they are to come out right. But the word "rod" in Proverbs is exactly the same Hebrew word that we find in Psalm 23; and a shepherd would never use the rod to beat the sheep. The rod was an instrument for the care, the protection, the oversight, and the guidance of the sheep. When we understand that, we gain new

understanding of the phrase, “spare the rod and spoil the child.”

Psalm 23 can also help us to understand some of the teaching of Jesus. Jesus told His disciples that when He departed from this earth, He would send them the Holy Spirit, whom he described as “the Comforter.” [*Jesus said, “I will pray to the Father, who will give you another Comforter, to be with you forever . . . the Holy Spirit” John 14:16,26*] In essence, the Holy Spirit continues the comforting work of the Good Shepherd. The Holy Spirit is God intimately present with us—here to guide us, to help us, and to enable us to experience the real comfort of God.

So the Psalm encourages us that we can find genuine comfort—we can “breathe free”—when we trust in the Lord our Shepherd. But here it is very important to recognize that to be *comforted* is not the same thing as to be *comfortable*. Our society devotes great effort towards trying to be comfortable. We have comfortable houses and comfortable clothes and comfortable cars. But there are many people who live in very comfortable circumstances who still are not comforted, but who are plagued with all sorts of anxieties and personal turmoil.

If you look at what God does throughout the Bible, you find that God is not very much in the business of making people comfortable. Often God seems to be in the opposite business. Moses was comfortable herding some sheep in Midian, but God laid hold of him and sent him to Egypt to rescue the people of Israel from the Pharaoh—a most uncomfortable task! David was comfortable tending to his father’s sheep, but God anointed him to be the future king of Israel, and he ended up fighting Goliath and dealing with all sorts of huge challenges. The disciples would have been a lot more comfortable if they had stayed in their fishing boats, but Jesus called them into the very difficult task of being “fishers of people.” Following God’s call seems to bring people into discomfort. So Paul in his letters spoke of the many discomforts he experienced after he became a missionary for Christ—how he was beaten and imprisoned and shipwrecked on account of his witness. Yet Paul could write, “Just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.” [II Cor. 1:5] Though often uncomfortable, Paul and the people of faith before him experienced profound spiritual comfort as they lived in harmony with God and God’s purposes, as they carried out God’s call, and as they felt God’s presence and guidance and help.

You will notice further that as Paul and the disciples and Old Testament leaders experienced God’s comfort, they did not just bask in feelings of comfort, but they became powerful instruments of God’s comfort for others. Paul expressed this dynamic in his second letter to the Corinthians, in the passage we heard earlier, in these words:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” [II Cor. 1:3–4] God comforts us “so that we may be able to comfort those who are in

any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” Clearly, God is comforting us not so that we can be comfortable, but so that we finally can be instruments of comfort for others.

Now we have the full picture. God is leading us as His flock not just so that we will have a pleasant stroll but so that we can share in God’s eternal purposes. We are called to journey and serve with God, so that we can both find and share the comfort of the Lord.