

witness to thy great faithfulness, mercy and love," which are examples of God's eternal characteristics. Change without change.

The shepherd of Psalm 23 is another example of "change without change." God is symmetrical in the sense that God is the same from any angle: A shepherd who "makes me lie down in green pastures...leads me beside still waters...restores my soul...leads me in right paths...walks with me through the darkest valley...prepares a table before me... anoints my head with oil" (vv. 2-5).

Psalm 23 challenges us to pull together the shepherd and the circle. This ancient poem shows us that the beauty of God is God's symmetry and God's ability to "change without change." It gives us insight into the nature of God, and helps us to find out "what God is." When we go really deep into the psalm, we begin to understand God.

Picture Psalm 23 as a circle, one that turns through a number of daily activities. This is "a psalm about living," says biblical scholar J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "for it puts daily activities, such as eating, drinking and seeking security, in a radically God-centered perspective." The psalm takes us through the cycle of life, and challenges us to put God at the center. Remember, God loves symmetry: and the shepherd belongs in the center of the circle.

"The Lord is my shepherd," says the psalm, "I shall not want" (v. 1). In the ancient world, kings were supposed to be the shepherds of their people, providing sustenance and security. Many earthly kings were bad shepherds, to be sure, but some were focused on being good to their people. In the circle of Psalm 23, God is portrayed as the greatest of shepherds, one who provides food in "green pastures" (v. 2), drink from "still waters" (v. 2), plus safety and shelter in "right paths" (v. 3).

The circle keeps turning, from food to drink to physical safety, and, in all of these areas, God gives us everything we need. God "restores my soul," says the psalm, or in a more down-to-earth translation, God "keeps me alive" (v. 3). Through all of the changes of life, God consistently provides for us. Change without change.

One of the challenges of this psalm is to stay focused on the changeless God while we go through the many changes of life. Caught up in the moment, we tend to respond to urgent demands instead of the gentle leading of our shepherd. "I love technology," writes radio host Jennifer Fulwiler, "but it does come with a huge temptation to feel a general increase

in *urgency* in our lives: I have to reply to that email! Respond to that comment on my wall on Facebook! Re-tweet that tweet! Read that direct message! Listen to that voicemail!"

She's right, isn't she? In our highly-connected age, we're constantly bombarded with ever-changing demands on our attention. Some call it "the tyranny of the urgent." It's a challenge is to keep the shepherd at the center of the circle, find some inner stillness and to listen for where God is leading us. God loves symmetry, and God wants us to keep from spiraling out of control.

Fortunately, God is there to help us. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley," says the psalm, "I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (v. 4). Bible scholar McCann says that this verse is "the structural and theological center of Psalm 23," reminding us that even in "the most life-threatening situation, God's provision is sufficient." This verse describes the character of the shepherd who is at the center of the circle. Everything else revolves around the shepherd.

Your "darkest valley" might be a terminal illness. A betrayal by a friend. A marital problem. The loss of a job. A failure in a college course or a business venture. Whatever your darkest valley, your shepherd God is with you, offering you the comfort of a rod and a staff. And while God's "rod" makes sense as a shepherd's tool, it also signifies royal authority. This rod is the scepter of a shepherd king, with power over anything that can hurt you. With the shepherd at the center, you can "fear no evil" (v. 4).

As the circle of the psalm continues to turn, God transitions from being a caring shepherd to a being gracious host. Once again, God's goodness remains constant while the situation changes. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies," says the writer of the psalm; "you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows" (v. 5). In this section, the host does exactly what the shepherd did at the beginning of the psalm: provides food, drink and protection. Change without change.

Through all of the difficult and disturbing changes of life, we are cared for by a changeless God. Although we face threats to our physical, emotional and spiritual health, we have a God at the center of our lives who gives us the assurance that "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" (v. 6).

Stumbling through dark valleys, we are pursued by goodness and mercy. Worrying about our daily needs, God sets a table of food and pours an overflowing cup. Unsure about our futures, God invites us to dwell in the Lord's house for as long as we live.

God offers us a perfectly symmetrical life, one in which today's threats are balanced by God's help, today's needs are balanced by God's gifts, and tomorrow's uncertainties are balanced by God's promises. The circle of life continues to turn, but it remains symmetrical when the shepherd is at the center.

Psalm 23 gives us a vision of a radically God-centered life. Not “radical” in terms of revolutionary or abrasive or extreme, but “radical” in the Latin (*radix*), which means "root." To center our lives on the God who is our shepherd is to go back to the very root of life, to the One who gives us everything we need.

We can be thankful that the universe appreciates symmetry, and we can be grateful that God repeats this pattern throughout all of creation. Green pastures are naturally going to be balanced by dark valleys, but, in both joy and sorrow, the Lord provides for us and walks beside us. Changes will come, no doubt about it. But through every transformation, we have a truly radical God, One who keeps us rooted. We can see that the world is a work of art, produced according to a particular style: symmetrical, with a shepherd in a circle.

Prayer: You, Lord, are the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Thank you, that you know me and call me by name. Thank you that you would search and search just for one missing sheep out of a hundred — even if it were me — and not rest until I was back in the fold. I shall not want, Lord, for I am yours, and you have given me what I need: green pastures, quiet waters, refreshment for my soul. Even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear. You, Lord, are my shepherd. Enfold me in your love. Amen.

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## The Shepherd and the Circle

Sunday, May 22, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

### Psalm 23

Human beings love symmetry. According to scientific research, symmetry is inherently attractive to the human eye. At a very young age, children are drawn to people with similarity between the left and right sides of the face. Babies spend more time staring at photographs of symmetric people than asymmetric people. It's no different for adults. In a study at the University of Louisville, pictures of different individuals were shown to a highly diverse group of adults from 13 different countries. They all had the same general opinion about who were the most attractive: the symmetric ones.

This is not to say that asymmetry is ugly. Don't get upset if you look in the mirror and notice that there are differences between the left and right sides of your face. No one is perfectly balanced. But the universe does seem to appreciate symmetry. In fact, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Frank Wilczek says that "the world is a piece of art, produced according to a very peculiar style." What he finds particularly striking "is the outstanding role of symmetry."

In an interview in *Spiegel Online*, Wilczek talks about "the universe's extraordinary symmetry and the overlap between beauty and physics." He points to the circle, which is a shape found throughout the universe. It is symmetrical because "you can rotate it around its center and it will remain a circle." Then he points to the equilateral triangle. He says that "small rotations will change it, but if you rotate it by 120 degrees it comes back to itself." In physics and mathematics, the principle of symmetry can be described as "change without change."

At first, it sounds mystical or bizarre: "Change without change." But think about it. The circle rotates, but still remains a circle. A triangle rotates, but still remains a triangle. Change without change.

God is also concerned with symmetry, even building it into creation. As the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" says so well: "Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest, sun, moon and stars in their courses above," which are examples of the circle of change in the world around us. But the hymn goes on to say that these changes "join with all nature in manifold