

# FINDING OUR SPIRITUAL CENTER OF GRAVITY

## Sermon by Rev. Ron Farr

Based on Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18  
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Our Clown Troupe today was exploring the meanings of the 23rd Psalm. The clowns were trying to figure it out in a way only clowns can do. Today we each will be finding our own way into the deeper meanings of this wonderful Psalm as well.

The 23rd Psalm is probably the most popular and most quoted text in the entire Bible. It has been a great source of strength for Jews and Christians alike down through the ages. It is almost always read at funerals, when people are feeling the most broken and the most hurt by life. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is a powerful text, and if we can absorb its truths today, they will help us find our spiritual center of gravity.

In the 1990's the car company Suzuki made a small SUV called the Sidetracker. It was soon discovered that this cute little 4 wheel drive vehicle was quite unstable on high speed turns, and had a disturbing tendency to rollover. It eventually was taken off the market and redesigned.

Like most SUV's the Sidetracker had a very high center of gravity which made it dangerous whenever the vehicle had to corner at higher speeds. It was especially dangerous when it was loaded up with supplies or people which raised its center of gravity even further. Every object has a center of gravity – cars, golf clubs, even human beings. An object's center of gravity is that point within it which is its perfect point of balance; it is the intersection of all the possible balance points of its mass in all directions, going forward-back, left-right, up-down.

For cars traveling at high speeds, it is most advantageous to have a low center of gravity. Sports cars in particular are built low to the ground and have wide wheelbases so that they will have low centers of gravity, allowing them to take corners at high speeds without flipping. Athletes, like football players, use the same principle. They lower their center of gravity by crouching down like a cat as they run through a field of tacklers, making them more stable and harder to knock over.

SUV's, because of stylistic reasons and because they need a lot of road clearance as 4 wheel drive vehicles, tend to sit up quite high, and therefore are stuck with high centers of gravity making them unsafe and unstable on high speed turns. In a way, we all are like those unstable SUV's as we careen through the twists and turns of life, as we swerve to miss the potholes and unexpected bumps on life's road. Life sometimes comes at us so fast, so relentlessly, that we don't quite know what is hitting us. When we haven't found our most stable spiritual center of gravity, we are all a bit unstable, out of balance, in danger of flipping over when life gets harsh

Jesus had a very strong established center of gravity - even a crucifixion would not throw him off. Jesus knew how to take all the twists and turns of life smoothly, he was in perfect balance even when the world around him was turbulent and threatening. Jesus was like a perfectly spinning gyroscope, always whirling perfectly without a wobble. He was unshakeable. People who came into his orbit felt strangely soothed and at peace – they started to find their own deeper center of gravity that they had not ever known. Jesus was in balance in all ways, and he calls us to live in that eternal balance as well

Jesus undoubtedly knew the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as we do. He probably memorized it as a kid. Let's go through it's wonderful words and phrases, and see how they can instruct us, as they once instructed Jesus, on how to find our inner center of gravity that makes us solid and unshakeable when life hits us the hardest.

The opening line, says, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.."* At the opening of this psalm, God is presented as a loving shepherd who tenderly cares for her tired and hungry flock. It is interesting that Jesus identifies himself with this theme as well. He said to his disciples, *"I am the Good Shepherd. I lay my life down for the sheep."*

It is understood by the Psalmist that we are God's flock, and it is God's joy to provide us what we need – blessings, comfort, shelter, nourishment, healing, grace. As soon as the Psalmist declares that God is his shepherd, he then says the next line, *"I shall not want."* I shall not be "in want" of anything when God is my Shepherd. That means that the world can no longer tell me that I am not good enough, or that I do not make enough, or that I do not own enough. With God, all that neediness and agitated desire for more and more just evaporates, and I discover that because God is my shepherd, I am complete, I have peace, I have joy, I have life, I have love, I have this present moment – I lack nothing.

*"The Lord is my shepherd ... He makes me lie down in green pastures."* The sheep of Palestine usually grazed on brown grass and weeds. There were not too many places where there were a lot of flowing fields of rich green grass. But God in this psalm finds those rare fields and brings us to them. Sometimes as we race through this life, we are not in good shape. Sometimes our spirits feel scraggly and thin and undernourished. Sometimes we are afraid and worried and burdened. Sometimes we are so wound up we cannot relax and sleep at night. Sometimes we are completely worn out and frazzled and irritable, and we don't know how we are going to get along with anyone.

Sometimes we feel so beaten down by people's criticism and harsh comments that we don't see the point in carrying on with the work we started. Sometimes after reading the

newspaper, we feel that this human world in which we live is just too cruel a place for us and our children to live in. And when we are dealing with all of this, we stop thinking clearly. We cannot step out of ourselves to see how we might be renewed or comforted.

God, who is our shepherd, sees our weariness, our hunger, our confusion about what to do. God, who is our shepherd, doesn't wait for our invitation, but just takes us by the hand and leads us out of our black holes and our overgrazed depleted routines, and leads us to fresh green pastures, and tells us to lie down. *"He makes me lie down in green pastures."*

Some years ago, our dog Halley, who is no longer with us, was taking a nap outside one summer day. She had been romping all around in the meadow and in the stream. She was completely covered with mud, and was now lying contentedly in the grass on her side with her eyes closed, just basking in the warm sun.

Sometimes we just need to lie in the grass like Halley and relax and open ourselves to some of God's more beautiful realities. So often we don't know how to do that or make time for it. Sometimes we are too wound up even to know how tense or hurting we are! And some of us will not lie down unless we are laid low by illness. Then we have no choice but to rest.

These are the times when God breaks into our whirlwind lives or into our tangle of worries and fears, and just benevolently "makes" us lie down. We need to lie down, we need to rest, we need "down-time" just to ponder our lives, our feelings, our priorities. We need "down-time" just to walk with God, to worship God, or ask for forgiveness. And when we are quiet enough, God does give us fresh perspectives, deeper ways of looking at things. God puts love in our hearts and dreams in our souls, all this wonderful, new, green grass.

*He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.*" The other day I was feeling a little frazzled and sad. I went down by the stream that runs by our house. I sat there for awhile just feeling the moist April air against my face and just watched the brook effortlessly flowing around rocks and fallen trees. I felt the tension in my mind slowly drain out of me. And I thought of the Good Shepherd who *"leads me beside the still waters and restores my soul."* Whatever is broken, whatever is hurting or sinful, whatever needs comfort, God is there as our Good Shepherd helping us to be restored and to find our center of gravity.

*"He leads me in the paths of righteousness, for his name sake."* God leads us in the right paths, not down the misguided, fruitless trails that we often walk down, not into the maze of mental deadends we often get lost in as we make imaginary angry speeches, or fantasize all kinds of terrible things that might happen to us. We often don't understand what is good for us, but God knows. God is truth, God is wisdom, God loves justice and fairness and decency. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes we just want our own way that ends up hurting us and others. So God leads us down God's paths of righteousness. Then it will all be right - not right just for me and my little ego, not right just for my little family, not right just for my little nation on this gigantic planet, but right for everyone.

*"Even though I walk through the valley of shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."* Of course, we all walk through the valley of the shadow of death. No one can

avoid that valley. We all face death every day - the possibility of our own impending death or the death of loved ones that can so change our families and our churches; the death of each day, of each season; the death of certain relationships and places when we move away, the death of certain eras of our life as when our children grow up and leave; the death of happy feelings when we are overwhelmed and depressed. Even in all these corridors of death that we walk through each day, we fear no evil, because we know that God, our shepherd, is with us and guiding us. We are inwardly confident because we know we are not alone when we face these shadows.

*"Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."* God is our comforter. God's shepherd staff nudges us into safety and comfort and joy. God tells me I am loved even if everyone around me is disgusted with me. God assures me that everything is OK even if all hell seems to be breaking loose.

*"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil."* When we remember the Good Shepherd, we are not even worried about our enemies, those who speak ill of us behind our backs, those who do not understand us, those who refuse to forgive us or give us a second chance. We are not worried or troubled. Their actions at first hurt and threaten, but in the end it all drains away. All that is left is a banquet table, in which God holds us, holds our enemies, and anoints our heads with the oil of blessing. There is in the end no conflict. There is only love, God's love.

Jesus says, *"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.... So there will be one flock, one shepherd."* And who are these other sheep? They are, I believe, the members of the entire human family. Everyone sits as a welcome guest at God's banquet. Everyone in the street is asked to come in and receive God's blessing.

*"My cup overflows."* The Good Shepherd brings us to our inner point of perfect balance, our perfect center of gravity. That is where all the doorways and windows of God are opened and love flows out. It is too much to take in and it is too much to hold. It is your cup overflowing. Life's riches and grace and beauty are an overflowing cup, gushing out of each moment, out of each relationship, out of each church community that tries so hard to be faithful. There is no end to this goodness. It shall follow us all the days of our life.

From Islam comes a wonderful and humorous story about what happens when people finally settle into their spiritual centers of gravity. The story is entitled Joneyed and the Barber. *"The holy man Joneyed went to Mecca disguised in beggar's clothing. There he saw a barber shaving a nobleman. When he asked the barber to shave him, the barber immediately left the wealthy client and shaved Joneyed. And he took no money from him. He actually gave Joneyed some alms."*

*Joneyed was so touched that he decided he would give to the barber whatever he got in alms that next day. It just so happened that a wealthy pilgrim came up to Joneyed and gave him a bag of gold coins. Joneyed went up to the barber's shop that evening and offered the gold to the barber. The barber yelled at him, saying, "What kind of holy man are you that you come to reward me for an act of love?"* (*The Song of the Bird*, by Anthony

*de Mello, p. 119)*

First you are impressed with the spirituality of the barber. He is so quick to care for the poor beggar who humbly asks for a shave. The barber risks offending his wealthy client by interrupting his shave to care for the beggar. Then he doesn't accept money for his work, but gives alms to the beggar. Wow! Such instantaneous compassion and risky generosity given with such abandon. This is how a person who has found his center of gravity lives.

Then Joneyed who promises to himself to give whatever is given him the next day in alms, so freely gives up the bag of gold that he was given, happily offering it to the kind barber. Joneyed never thinks for a moment that he might keep the gold for himself. Wow again! Here is another person who is living in his spiritual center of gravity. And when you have two people living from their centers of gravity, there is so much abundance pouring out that neither one of them knows what to do with it. When Joneyed finally gives the gold to the barber, the barber yells at him for trying to pay him for an act of love! The barber has no interest in the gold, just in offering everyone love. And Joneyed just wants to offer kindness and blessing with the gold that somebody gave him.

This is what begins to happen to you and me as well. When we finally start to live out of our spiritual center of gravity which the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm so clearly shows us, we become very stable, very centered and balanced, very relaxed and calm like Jesus. And our spirit begins to expand and become very big like God, like a giant redwood soaring up into the sky - it is so solidly rooted in the ground, that it can live for 1000's years and peacefully watch time and change rush past it without any disturbance.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm says, *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days so my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* The house of the Lord is where you should dwell everyday. This is your center of gravity. Live there, it is where you are strong, it is where you are loved, it is where everything is in balance. It is where everything is blessed and makes sense. Live there, and no place else.

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