

Series: The Benefits of Intergenerational Spiritual Formation

Sermon Text: Psalm 23

Title: Intergenerational Community Sermon 4 of 4

BIG IDEA: Our lives are a shared journey following Christ from infancy through death.

(App to get lesson/slides, ask questions. Color Pg)

Good morning my friends and family. It does my heart good to see your wonderful faces and to hear your welcoming voices, you all create a positive environment that frees me to share my real self more and more. We are in week 4, our final week, of our intergenerational community mini series journeying through Psalm 23 and naming some of the benefits that each age and stage of life has for the whole community. We've covered the stage of childhood, and how they remind us to stay humble and receptive to our heavenly father, who loves and guides and protects us. We wrestled with adulthood and how God invites us to partner with him to bring more of heaven to earth, outwardly into our spheres of influence as well as inwardly, into our own selves. Last week, in old age, we took a seat at the table with God, bearing witness to God's continued loving presence in our lives, as well as considering God's invitation to give AND receive honor and value by sharing our story with others.

This week, we turn our faces towards a hard truth, towards the reality that our lives will eventually end as we know it. This week we face the stage that we'll call, end of life. I know that this stage of life can be for some of us, a very difficult and painful, maybe even terrifying topic to hold, and so I want to give you permission to move around, or journal, or do whatever else might bring comfort at this time.

Like the past three weeks, we are anchored in Psalm 23. If you are planning to memorize this psalm with me, I invite you to say it with me. It's up on the screen.

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall
dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.

For many of us, Psalm 23 brings back memories of funerals and gravesites, as the minister attempted to comfort those gathered around. Children got all dressed up, not quite understanding what's going on. Adults feeling the weight, the pain, and finality of their loved one's passing. Old Age having attended too many of these, saying their goodbyes to yet another loved one, often wondering when their turn will be.

Death is a serious and terrifying reality. We Americans run from it like the plague. We are not culturally brought up knowing what to do or how to embrace death. Even the mention of death is gross, or sad, or distasteful. Week one, I mentioned that I would get to answering why "Americans don't really have an honorable way

to describe old age.” I didn’t forget, for the five of you who remembered. Brandon, you can relax now. We don’t like old age because it reminds us, a culture obsessed with youth and strength, obsessed with progress and possibility, that all of that will end. We make jokes about death like, “whoever dies with the most toys wins.”

We use phrases to soften the delivery: kick the bucket, pass away, bite the dust, six feet under... the list never ends. We avoid even talking about death.

But why is death so distasteful and uncomfortable? Death surrounds us all the time, it’s part of our normal everyday lives... In fact, you are the happy executor and profiteer of death all the time. Bugs, moles, termites, ants, cockroaches, weeds, poison ivy, mold, mildew, spiders. We spend money to kill the things we don’t want. We root for the good guys in movies and TV to kill the bad guys. We shout, “kill ‘em” at sports games. Then there’s death at a distance. Earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, wars in distant countries, famine, assassinations, shootings. These deaths shake us for a while, and we may find ways to help or repair, but eventually we move on. But when it comes to the death of a loved one, or our own death, the tone changes, doesn’t it. When faced with this kind of death, personal, close, relational death, it can be devastating, it can be traumatic.

And God knows this. Of course he knows your pain and sorrow... He’s intimately been with you your whole life, experiencing every moment with you. He was with you in your mother’s womb, he was with you as a child, and everyday since, leading up to today.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life verse 6 declares. All the days of your life, God has been with you, “pursuing you” with his goodness and mercy, as many translations state. There has never been a time in your life

when God's goodness and mercy have NOT been pursuing you... that's what the 23rd Psalm is all about! GOD IS WITH YOU! He's always been with you! I love how Eugene Peterson puts it in his bible paraphrase, he wrote, "Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life." Smooshing it all together, "Surely your goodness and mercy, your beauty and love shall follow me, pursue me, chase after me, all the days of my life.

I sat down with a gentleman last week, 72 years old. I asked him one of my typical hospice chaplain questions: *is there anything you're afraid of these days?* He sat there a moment, breathing slowly, tears welling up in his eyes, "Well, I'm not afraid of death, I know where I'm going, but I am afraid of dying." That hit me like a freight train. After the initial wave of his honesty settled, I replied, "that makes a lot of sense." And it does make a lot of sense. For the child of God, death has lost its sting, but the process of death is out of our control. For the most part, we don't get to choose how we leave this world, that's God's job. And if I'm honest, verse 6 never lets me know how many days there are in, "all of the days of my life." I don't know how long I will live, I don't get to know the day or the hour of my death. And so, I have to point out a very sobering reality that is painfully obvious in what verse 6 is NOT stating, and that is: The age and stage that is the end of life, could come at any time. No one is guaranteed a long and lustrous life that slowly fades off into the sunset. No one is guaranteed tomorrow, no one is.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. Yes and true and Amen! But God never tells us how many days that is. And this can be terrifying. It's so far out of our control that we push this reality to the back of our minds and hearts. Maybe that's why when a loved one dies, we not only grieve and suffer the loss, but we also have to confront the reality that death is coming for us

as well. And the fact that we are not in control of that process, can bring a huge amount of fear and anxiety.

God, I celebrate and rejoice that you are with me, that your goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life, but Lord, in the same breath, I am scared of what's to come, I am terrified of dying. Dying is completely foreign to me, it's unknowable. I don't have any prior experience or knowledge that I can muster to prepare me for death... I have to simply trust you Lord, entirely.

And there you have it... now we are back to humility, to trust, to dependence, to vulnerability. We are invited back to a childlike faith in our heavenly Father. But like any good father, he does not leave us to fend for ourselves, let's finish verse 6 and hear how God has chosen to comfort us in our time of need. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.

You, and I... we, shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. I cannot state how powerful verse 6 is for our everyday lives. Verse 6, all of Psalm 23 really, is designed to remind us of God's gifts of joy, purpose, hope, and peace in the midst of our frantic, fearful and anxiety riddled souls. God knows our hearts and what we fear, and what we truly need. There are 4 big existential fears, many philosophers [from Irvin Yalom and onward,] have agreed upon. 4 big fears that come with life, with existing...

- The fear of isolation,
- The fear of meaninglessness,
- The fear that of our own freedom to choose and the consequences our choices bring,

- And the fear of death.

And with all these fears, always present in the back of our minds and hearts, going all the way back to the garden of Eden, like the echo of Adam and Eve's rejection of God, Psalm 23 speaks to them all. We fear isolation. We fear loneliness, we fear being cast out, not being connected to anyone, that we are doomed to walk the earth utterly alone. But God, having always been close to you, whispers, a better word...

- I am your shepherd; you shall not want.
- I makes you lie down in green pastures. I lead you beside still waters.
- I restore your soul. I lead you in paths of righteousness for my name's sake.

You are never alone, declares the Lord. Remember, I have always been with you. Even though God removed Adam and Eve from the garden, he never left their side! Guiding them, leading them, shepherding, they were still his kids, after all. If you feel lonely or isolated, I invite you to do a couple things today...

- Don't leave here without connecting with someone. We are designed for joy—that feeling you get when you walk into a room, and another person is excited that you are here. That's joy.
- Talk with God plainly, ask him where he has been in your life, and give him time and space to respond and show you where he's been.

Second, we fear meaninglessness. We fear that we have no purpose, that our actions, our very lives, are pointless, having no value or worth. But God stands you up, lifts your face to his, and speaks identity into you... Even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Do not fear evil, for I am with you; my rod and my staff, they will comfort you. You bear my image, child, you are infinitely valuable to me don't you remember? How empty and worthless did the Israelites feel as slaves, under the whips of Pharaoh? God brought them out of meaninglessness and gave them back their purpose. As his children, they were to

partner with him to bring heaven to earth. If you feel like life has no meaning, like you have no value or purpose or worth, I invite you to risk a couple things:

- Talk with your family, your friends, this week and ask them what difference you have made in their lives.
- Dare to pray this... “heavenly Father, help me live today as your precious child and faithful partner.”

Third, we fear the weightiness and responsibility of our own freedom. We must choose and act in this life, and every choice comes with repercussions. But God talks with you, not to condemn you but to recommission you... You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. You are not lost, you have not failed, let's repair and keep going, my child. The Israelites, having been given God's commands and living in the land God promised them, sowed and reaped the consequences of their actions during the time of the Judges, and all the while God demonstrated his redemptive nature. If you feel hopeless, defeated, like you are all out of options or the weight of your life's choices are overwhelming, I invite you into a couple things:

- Share your story with one of our church leaders or small group leaders.
- Seek ways to repair what you can. There is never a bad time to ask for forgiveness for the damage you've caused, intentional or unintentional.

And fourth, we come back to the fear of death. We fear the unknown, we fear the ending of our lives. We fear what we cannot control, we fear the future. But God, with a smile, grabs your hand to show that he's already with you... Surely my goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life, and you shall dwell in my house Forever. You are mine, you always have been and always will be. I am not letting you go. King David, sits with all of Israel, his people, God's children and remembers their story and history. He recalls the goodness and mercy of God, and rests in it, knowing that God will continue to be with him and his people today

and forever. If you are scared of death, of what's to come, if the fear of death brings panic to your heart, I want to highlight quite possibly the biggest benefit that the end of life stage has to offer our community... Embracing the sobering truth that we will die some day, that we are not guaranteed tomorrow, we are able then to hear God's invitation to live full and complete lives TODAY, to live lives of connection and joy, of meaning and purpose, of hope and flourishing WITH GOD and his community.

Paradoxically, to face our own eventual deaths, we are freed up to live the lives that God has designed for us to live. And in so doing, we practice living in the kingdom of God. Tim, that sounds great and all, but how do we practically do this? I am so glad you asked! Haha. Can I get ridiculously practical for the first time in the series? Throughout the Bible, God invites us to reconcile and repair damaged relationships, and to live grateful and loving lives. Complete lives are *shalom* lives, where we have peace with each other, with the land, and with God. Talking with folks at the end of their lives, I agree with Dr. Ira Byock, an author and physician, that there are basically four things, or conversations, that matter most. Now don't be fooled, these things are heavy and risky and vulnerable, they require bravery.

The first two conversations focus on restoring and repairing broken relationships. In prayer with God, examine your heart and relationships for:

- Those whom you may need to ask forgiveness from,
- Those whom you may need to offer forgiveness to.

The last two conversations are more about gratitude and celebration. In prayer with God, examine your life and relationships for:

- Those whom you want to say thank you to, and name specifics.
- Those whom you want to tell them, I love you.

These 4 things are a good starting point:

Please forgive me for... I forgive you for... Thank you for... I love you.

As we move on from our intergenerational mini series and pivot into the gospel of Matthew, where we will encounter the life and ministry of the Son of God, Immanuel, the Word made flesh, God with us. That sounds awfully similar to the central point in verse 4 of Psalm 23 doesn't it? I will fear no evil, for You are with me. Come back next week, and let's dive into God's ultimate demonstration of love, in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Would you pray with me.

And remember, wherever you are on your journey of trusting Christ, you need not work through anything alone. Reach out and let us help!

Sunday to Monday Connection:

- **Question:** As you meet with your people this week, consider this question: If God really is with you in every part of life, from your first breath to your last what is one small way you could live with more love, courage, or gratitude this week?
- **Next Step:** As we close our journey through Psalm 23 and the stages of life, we turn toward one reality none of us can avoid: the end of life. Psalm 23 does not pretend death is easy or painless, but it boldly proclaims that death is never faced alone. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." For those saved by Christ, death has lost its final sting, but dying still calls us into humility, trust, and dependence. We are invited back into a childlike faith, placing our whole lives, including our endings, into the hands of our Shepherd. The end-of-life stage gives the whole community a gift: it reminds us that today matters, relationships matter, and God is with us, now and forever.
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to investigate further what all this might mean for you, please come talk with any of our leaders, or the person who brought you.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. How does acknowledging our mortality help us live more intentionally and faithfully right now?
2. Where do you most struggle with fear; loss, control, loneliness, or death; and how does Psalm 23 speak directly into that fear?
3. Which of these conversations might God be inviting you into this week: Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

- The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016)