

**“Living On, and On, and On?”**

**Summer Preaching Series: “Encountering God through the Psalms” – Part 8**

**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: August 30, 2009**

**Psalm 23**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H. M. Peden Copyright: 2009, I. Peden  
MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

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Our Summer Preaching Series, *Encountering God through the Psalms*, is nearing an end. Just as we are renewed in body and mind during the more restful and relaxing days of summer, my prayer during this series is that we will all have a renewed encounter with the living God by listening again for God’s word through the very human feelings and meditations expressed in selected Psalms. Today we will spend the next few minutes meditating on what is undoubtedly the best-loved psalm in the Bible: Psalm 23.

As I read this psalm again in my preparation, I imagined the psalmist – most likely in his mid to later years of life – starting to reflect on how much longer he might live. Whether or not you have reached what I prefer to call “the more chronologically advantaged years,” – please note, I am not calling them “the more *chronically* advantaged years” – I wonder if you have ever asked yourself how much longer you will live.

I have an idea that Psalm 23 was the result of the psalmist’s reflection as he asked the question: “Lord, how much longer will I live?” And then he came forth with this magnificent answer portraying a picture of the Lord as his Shepherd. And so I further imagined that Psalm 23 became an affirmation of faith: words that inspired the psalmist for the rest of his earthly life. He pictured his earthly life as “green pastures,” as “still waters,” as “paths of righteousness,” as “a table,” as “my cup,” and even as “the valley of the shadow of death.” In each word picture he affirmed that the Lord would be with him.

The central point he makes about his life is abundantly clear in the last verse of his hymn with this powerful affirmation: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.* What the psalmist is saying is that God’s goodness and mercy shall follow him as he lives on, and on, and on. The psalmist is declaring that even when this earthly life is over, he will continue to live

on, and on, and on with God and in God's house – a phrase which surely refers to God's eternal home, and indirectly to the psalmist's belief in eternal life.

In Charlotte I used to visit a parishioner who was a centenarian. She is one who is very "chronologically advantaged" ....one who just seems to be living on, and on, and on! Her name is JoAnn. She turned 106 this year. On more than one occasion JoAnn would remark: "I don't know why I am living so long!" The last report I received she was still in relatively good health for her age. In earlier years (when she was about 99 or 100 years old) she made our family a number of ceramic pieces: a Communion chalice, a Christmas tree, and the quaintest little country church with windows that light up. We keep it near a window in the living room of parsonage. I used to reassure her every time I saw her that she was an example to show us how to live if we are blessed by God to live as long as her.

During one visit, she turned to me and told me how old I was. "How in the world do you know that?" I asked. JoAnn replied that on one occasion I had told her my age and then she added: "You've got a long way to go to get to my age. I'm nearly twice your age!" Then she said something that was quite amazing: "Now that I have reached this age," she said, "I would rather like to live on. As long as there was no suffering, I would like to live on, and on, and on." I remember looking at her quite stunned that she had really embraced the idea of living on, and on, and on! Although she may still question the longevity of her life, one thing is certain: JoAnn is not eager to die any time soon!

Five years ago my family in South Africa faced a very challenging situation. To cut a long story short, my brother-in-law, Richard, 49 years old at the time, underwent emergency quadruple bypass surgery. Unfortunately, Richard began to bleed soon after getting to ICU and had to be wheeled back into the operating room two more times – probably a total of 10 hours surgery. When the doctors were finally able to remove the ventilator, and Richard could breathe on his own, the first words out of his mouth were: "I'm alive! I'm alive!" Strangely, Richard's father had died of a massive heart attack in the 49<sup>th</sup> year of his earthly life. Would Richard have wanted to die at the same age as his father? That is a non-question for those of us who know how much he loves life, how

much he loves his work as a highly successful insurance consultant, how much he loves his family, and in recent months how much he loves his first grandchild, Olivia. No, although Richard had a near death experience, he wanted to live on, and on, and on. It would not be any different for us. Given a choice, I believe we would all want to live on, and on, and on.

Now these two stories of real people who long to keep on living must be set in the wider context of our national and global context in which we all long for all people to live on, and on, and on. We long for a world that is so very different from the world we have come to know. We long for a world in which we can all live together as one family ... a world in which love is conquering hate ... peace is replacing violence ... order is superseding chaos ... right is triumphing over wrong ... and good is emerging permanently victorious over evil. We can't fully account for this feeling, or from where it comes. But it is there. We feel it deep within our being.

Dreaming of such a world of grace and mercy and peace for all people is like dreaming of living forever. And, forgive me if I put words in your mouth, but I have a strong notion that all the honest people in this room today would admit to one another that we long to live forever ... to live on, and on, and on. No human being, except someone whose mind is wracked with a pain too much to endure, really wants to die, or see others – especially young people – die.

Some theologians have called death “the old enemy that stalks us.” Psychologists have called death “the ultimate anxiety.” Death is not welcome, not at an early age when tragedy strikes, or when cancer or any other deadly disease attacks, not at age 49 after open heart surgery that promised to give a new lease on life, and not at 106 years old when there is still a love and a zest for life, and for sharing joy and kindness with others. We want life ... life that continues on, and on, and on.

Are we going to live on, and on, and on? All who believe in the risen Christ lay claim to the promise of resurrection for all God's faithful and the gift of eternal life. Eternal life is a life of exquisite quality, rather than quantity ... a life with the Lord that

begins now – as the Shepherd Psalm affirms – extends through the valley of the shadow of death, and then continues after death into the eternal realm.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, once assured his hearers of this when he said: “I am the Good Shepherd ...My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.” In short, what Jesus was saying is that those who follow him will live on, and on, and on. Death is but a gateway, a shadowy valley, through which we pass from living on, and on, in this earthly life to living on, and on, and on in eternal life ...to living forever when the proposition “on” will no longer exist..

The book of Revelation provides a heavenly vision of a great multitude which no one can number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before God’s throne ... clothed in white robes. These are those ... these are the saints who are already living on, and on, and on ... and there are others who are destined to join them ... including you and me.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Christian theologian during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He opposed Hitler and all that Nazi Germany stood for. He died a martyr’s death. When the two guards came to take Bonhoeffer to the gallows, he briefly took a friend aside and said, “This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life.”

When Tim Robbins’ character in *The Shawshank Redemption* is thrown into the cooler for two weeks after raising the issue of a new trial, he says: “I guess it comes down to this: Get busy dying, or get busy living.”

That’s a great way of putting the issue before us, too. Here’s the question: As those who have the Lord as our Shepherd ...those who worship the risen Christ who said, “Because I live you shall live also,” are we busy dying or busy living on, and on, and on? I must answer for myself. You must answer for yourself.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.