

## Psalm 23

Rabbi Harold Kushner

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## The Congregational Church of Needham

This summer our sermons will focus on spiritual giants of our time. The people we have chosen for this series are men and women from several faith traditions. Our list includes Desmond Tutu, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Roger Shinn, Shane Claiborn, C.S. Lewis, and Bill McKibbin.

Today I will talk about Rabbi Harold Kushner- Rabbi Laureate of Temple Israel in Natick, and world-renowned author of many inspiring books. As a young man, Rabbi' Kushner's son Aaron was born with a rare genetic disease which caused the child to age prematurely. Aaron lived for only 14 years when he died of 'old age'. After his death, Rabbi Kushner grieved publicly by writing a book entitled When Bad things Happen to Good People. In that book, he laid his soul bare as he spoke to hundreds of thousands of people who have had to endure senseless loss. As a rabbi he questioned his faith, and examined whether God was punishing him. The book documents the way his questions led him to a deeper more mature faith - believing in a God who cannot spare us, but whose love is never diminished but more keenly felt in life's times of greatest challenge and deepest anguish.

I first heard Rabbi Kushner speak when I invited him to do an interfaith lecture at the First Congregational Church in Winchester. That sanctuary seats close to 750 people and it was full that evening. Kushner is not a tall man but the crowd grew hushed as he stepped into the pulpit. Then, he spoke without notes about his family, his own questions of faith, and what he had learned about God. When he finished and sat down I had the feeling we would have sat there for another hour without regret, hanging on his every word.

In the late 1990's I heard Rabbi Kushner when he spoke at a religious conference I attended. Again the auditorium was packed, but I scurried to find a seat I did not care where it was, I was just grateful to be there, and I knew as long as I could hear him I would be satisfied. Again he told stories that rang true and dispensed wisdom that made sense. Though decades later, his message was still fresh, and it found a hungry place in my soul as I searched that day for the kind of truth that is hard to find.

As we explore Rabbi' Kushner's life and his impact on the life of faith in this country and around the world where his books have been published in countless languages, I chose the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm for our scripture lesson. There are several reasons for this.

1. Rabbi Kushner did his doctoral dissertation on the psalms and spent his life studying the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm- his favorite one.
2. After September 11, 2001 when people everywhere were searching for wisdom his editors asked him to write something and Kushner decided to write a book about psalm 23 and why the healing wisdom in this psalm is so important in our time.

What can we learn about faith from this psalm and the way Rabbi Kushner explains it?

**In the first place God cares** – The image of God as a shepherd is unique and original. In ancient times, the Greek gods sat in councils ruling from the clouds. They played games and made bets on human behavior. They could be aloof and petty. The gods lusted after some people and were jealous of others but overall they were impervious. The psalmist paints the portrait of a god who is kind, someone who cares for us.

This image of God portrays a tender relationship. Shepherds are gentle, unassuming, and patient. They are thoughtful, and observant. Rarely, cruel or cunning, shepherds were known for their kindness. The psalm says that God is like a shepherd.

*One of the greatest artistic creations of all time is the **Pieta** by Michelangelo. In 1498 when the artist was himself only 23, he carved the work depicting Mary the mother of Jesus with a dead son on her lap. His work has touched people for centuries as few pieces of art have. But this sculpture is not based on anything factual. Mary was never reported to have seen Jesus dead in any of the gospels. Rabbi Kushner believes that this art moves us so because it is not a depiction of Mary but a feminine view of God who receives the son he gave birth to and has lost.”<sup>1</sup>*

If Rabbi Kushner is correct that Michelangelo’s art is a masterpiece because it depicts a relationship between God and Jesus- perhaps that is why the piece takes your breath away. It shows us the face of God in a way we can empathize with. It reveals how much God cares for Jesus, and potentially for us too.

**In the second place you cannot really find that connection with God until you are honest about your life.** The writer of psalm 23 has made God much more approachable and has changed the way people think about God, in some of the same ways that Rabbi Kushner’s writings have made it easier for many people today to trust in God. It is not just the shepherd’s image that conveys trust, it is the psalmist’s honesty. They help us know God by telling of their own hard journey to find God. Like the rabbi, the psalmist lays his own soul bare and uses his own struggle to teach others about God.

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase of Kushner, Harold. The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-third Psalm. New York:Random House, 2003. P. 25-26.

Attributed to King David, no one knows for sure who wrote the psalm; most scholars doubt that he is the sole author.

Rabbi Kushner explains the psalm this way: *It looks like this psalm was written by someone who has experienced life as a journey. He started living a pleasant comfortable life, with lush grass and cool water. But then something shattered that comfortable life. It might have been anything- illness, rejection, betrayal, death. The man wrestled with the same things that we face.*

*The psalm indicates that this man was in despair. Images of darkness dominate his thoughts and the psalms temper changes. The psalmist cried out to God, and this miracle occurred. The miracle was not that the man's fortune was reversed, but that he was not alone. The miracle is that he found life worth living - God answered his prayers not by replacing what had been lost but by taking him by the hand and guiding him through the valley of the shadow. To his amazement he discovered that he found sunshine again. The past had not changed but the future suddenly seemed more inviting.<sup>2</sup>*

It is ironic that one of the hardest places for us to be honest about our lives is when we come to church. Many of us find it much more comfortable to confess our worries or warts standing in line at Starbucks or changing in the locker room at the gym. Maybe it is precisely the anonymity of those moments that help us to be real. One of the hardest things about churches is the temptation we all have to sit together in worship with prim smiles that speak of tension just beneath the surface- a depth of vulnerability we rarely expose to one another. Instead we plaster over the worries or fears that keep us up at night. We submerge the unpleasant pieces of our lives. It makes it hard for anyone to get close to us when we put on a fake exterior. Even god may be trying to crack the facade or looking for some entrance into a more honest conversation.

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<sup>2</sup> Kushner, Harold. The lord is My shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty third Psalm. New York:Random House, 2003 p. 11

**The gift in the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm is its honesty.** *God's promise is not that we will be safe but that we will never be alone...We will hurt but we will heal. We may grieve but we will be whole again.*<sup>3</sup>

The author of this psalm has the ability to talk about his journey with God because he lays his soul bare and describes both his trials and his triumphs.

The line of the psalm that says – He leads me in paths of righteousness means something different in Hebrew. It means the roundabout paths of my life end up to be right. The paths I would not choose put me in the right place. It is no wonder the translation is so tricky because it is wisdom - hard to swallow. But so many times in life our wandering turns out to be a blessing. Our detours bring us like Moses to the burning bush and holy ground.

**Finally, the psalm says God will provide.** Now this sounds like pie in the sky. Most of us wish that prayer would work like finding a magic bottle with a genie in it. We rub the bottle and make our petitions and all the problems are whisked away. Several decades ago there was a show that played with that fantasy. In the 1960's there was a television show in which a 2000 year old genie played by Barbara Eden fell in love with an astronaut played by Larry Hagman. The genie kept trying to please her master as they lived together. She would fold her arms and snap her head, but often the changes she brought on ended up in folly. Her magic brought trouble, or made the situation worse. The show was a comedy because these wishes usually backfire, demonstrating the moral that life is not enhanced through instant gratification or magic wishes. The psalmist wrestles with this truth.

The second line of the psalm- "I shall not want" is a poor translation of the Hebrew. In fact- we are born to crave food and to want things and even to covet the things we see other people enjoying. That is as human as breathing. We all wrestle with cravings and insecurities. William James writes- "There is a pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life." No matter how settled or unsettled you feel the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

psalm says that If God is your shepherd, you have all you need. You lack for nothing. That is not just some religious platitude but a deeper truth.

*Perhaps this is the lesson the second line of the psalm would teach us. If there are empty spaces in your life, dreams that never come true, people who were once there but are gone now, the purpose of those empty spaces is not to frustrate you or brand you as a loser. The empty spaces may be there to give you room to grow. Kushner re-writes the psalm-*

*The lord is my shepherd. I shall often want. I shall yearn, and long. I shall aspire. I shall continue to miss the people that have been taken from me as loved ones die, or the abilities that are taken from me as skills diminish over time. I shall probe the empty spaces in my life like a tongue probing a missing tooth. But I will never feel deprived or diminished if I don't get what I yearn for, because I know how blessed I am by what I have."<sup>4</sup>*

I cannot remember how many times I came to someone's bed-side and felt so empty. I thought there was nothing I could bring to this moment, because the person I was visiting had endured great pain, or would not make it. In the emptiness I would bow my head and say these beloved words. Strangely, the person lying there, who seemed to be unconscious, would join me, and together we would find God. Somehow we would both recognize that neither of us was alone.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 36