

Scripture Lesson: Psalm 23

Pew Bible O.T. pg. 474-475

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

Scripture Lesson: Acts 15:1-11

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 126

¹Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ²And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses." ⁶The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, ⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Psalm 23 and Acts 15:1-11

05/10/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

Sermon Series, Part 4: Lead Courageously

Rev. Amy Terhune

Many scholars across the years have concluded that one cannot really understand John Wesley without knowing something of his mother Susanna. She was the youngest of 24 children born to the Rev. Dr. Samuel Annesley by his second wife. In those days, in England, one was either a member of the church of England, or one was a dissenter. Rev. Annesley left the church of England long before Susanna was born, feeling that it was dangerous to align the church with the political power of the land. He pastored a presbyterian church at Spitalfield for most of his ministry. All of his children, including the girls, were taught to read and were permitted to read anything in his considerable library. He taught his children to question what they read and to challenge ideas that they didn't agree with.

Susanna was a voracious reader with a keen intellect and an independent spirit. At age 13, she left her father's church and chose to become a member of the Church of England. With his reluctant blessing, she went ahead a married Rev. Samuel Wesley at age 19, and they settled at his Anglican parish in Epworth. Their marriage was rocky since Susanna was not in the habit of keeping her opinions to herself, and they separated for a time. But her faith was rock solid and eventually they reunited.

When Samuel went away to church convocation each year, he'd hire a curate to fill his pulpit. Susanna raised her family to worship morning and evening every day, and even when Samuel was gone, she read the morning and evening services from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer as well as printed sermons or lesson tracts on scripture. In 1710, the curate Samuel hired was so dull that the congregation began to gather around the parsonage to listen to Susanna instead. The curate wrote and complained to Samuel, who in turn wrote to Susanna and asked her not to do that anymore. Susanna wrote back: *"If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience: but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Samuel did not send a command, and Susanna continued to lead worship, drawing far bigger crowds than the curate.

She raised her children to read English, Greek, and Latin, and they studied theology, science, literature, and the arts. She spent an hour a week with each child individually, instructing them in their unique gifts and calling. She was not a warm and tender mother, but despite her strictness, she was affirming and supportive. It was from his mother that John Wesley learned the good news of salvation, the joy of service, the value of education, and the importance of caring for the poor. It was her influence that led him to utilize lay preachers, commission female class leaders and teachers, and establish girls' schools in industrial communities for the daughters of factory workers. She was far from perfect, but as we celebrate Mother's Day today, we remember her influence and her example as one who lead courageously and empowered her sons to do the same.

As we continue our sermon series on the vision statement of the United Methodist Church, we hear that The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously... I find that interesting. The leadership of the church reminds us that courageous leadership is part of our vision.

I recall hearing a story once about a young man applying for college. One of the questions on the application was: are you a leader? He participated in several extra-curricular activities, but didn't hold office in any of them. And so, to the question "Are you a leader", he truthfully answered no. Imagine his surprise when he got his acceptance letter to the university, which read, in part, "Dear Sir, we are pleased to admit you to the university. You are part of an incoming class of 1,962 other students, of whom there are 1,961 leaders. Given that, we have admitted you because we felt it important for their development to have at least one follower..." Okay then.

Again this week, this sermon is interactive. As we consider courageous leadership, I'm going to give you a question, and have you turn and discuss it with someone nearby, preferably somebody you don't know very well, if possible. Please make sure everyone is included – I don't want anyone left out. You've got four minutes to discuss the following two questions:

- 1) Think about leaders who have had a positive influence on you. What traits or qualities made them a good leader?
- 2) What does courage look like to you in 2026?

Okay, let's hear some answers....

Not of all of us called to lead, and not all of us are called to lead the same way. But the church seeks to create a culture where those who are gifted and graced to lead can find the nurture and opportunity to use those gifts. But even more, the church calls us to be leaders together as a community of faith – to have courage to take new and innovative steps in loving boldly, serving joyfully and living our faith and our commitment to Jesus Christ. We live in a culture that regularly distorts the message of Jesus. The cross is used to justify racism, misogyny, homophobia, violence, greed, and narrow political ideologies. But the cross in Scripture was where Jesus gave himself in love for a world he came to save and renew by his reign. The church is called to lead – to be a prophetic voice for truth, love, justice, and peace and to model Christ's way of including the marginalized, lifting the downtrodden, and loving our enemies.

If we turn to our scripture today, we find that is what happens in this lesson from Acts. There are a group of folks who want to stick with laws and customs of Moses. And that's not all bad. After all, for centuries, the Jewish people were known by their laws – laws about what they ate, how they prayed, and how they treated one another. Their laws separated them from the Pagan and polytheist cultures that surrounded them. It made them unique. When Babylon demolished Jerusalem and deported Jews by the thousands some 600 years before Christ, ripping them from their homeland and carting them away to far-off cities in the Babylonian empire, dividing families and communities, it was their unique laws that sustained them across miles and centuries. When the apostle Paul and the early Christian missionaries began evangelizing throughout the Roman empire, they found Jewish communities in major cities of the region – communities that had endured deportation and continued to thrive where they were landed: Greece, Macedonia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. These little Jewish enclaves followed the law of Moses in their exile. They circumcised their sons, followed kosher dietary restrictions, and prayed to their one God regardless of what the culture around them demanded. That's how they kept their identity and remembered who they were from generation to the next.

But as gentiles join the ranks of the saved, the question before the church was this: Is the law necessary for salvation? In other words, in order to follow Jesus, does one have to follow Moses first? The church gathered. It prayed. It listened and discussed and turned to the Spirit for discernment. And it rightly discerned that we are saved by grace alone. The Spirit comes to Jew and Gentile alike. This doesn't mean the law of Moses is meaningless. Quite the contrary – it offers inspiration and a way of living a disciplined and generous life. Moreover, the law can serve to reveal our need for the grace of Jesus Christ, but it can never save us on its own. The church defined itself as a new movement in Christ, one that would be defined not be a strict adherence to the law, but to a strict reliance on the saving grace of Jesus Christ, and therefore, one open to peoples of all tribes, customs, languages, and backgrounds.

Don't underestimate the courage this took. It required them to leave behind what was comfortable and familiar, what had defined their leaders for centuries, in order to welcome those who were different, strange, and unknown. The unfamiliar was welcomed as part of the family.

In thinking about leading courageously, Rev. Dr. Derek Weber rightly asks, "where does courage come from? Most of us would assume it comes from within. It is a call to "man up" in modern parlance. Or like Lady MacBeth tells her husband when he wavers on the mission to kill the king and take the throne and wonders if he might fail: "then we fail! But screw your courage to the sticking place, and we'll not fail!" (Macbeth Act 1, Scene 7) We might say it more simply these days, guided by a certain shoe manufacturer: "Just do it!" ...And certainly, there is a human component to the ability to act courageously. But scripture suggests an alternate source. [adapted from Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of

Preaching Ministries, UMC Board of Discipleship planning team for “An Adverbial Faith” Worship Series, [https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/miracle-sunday-worship-study-resources#worship-series.](https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/miracle-sunday-worship-study-resources#worship-series)]

The beloved 23rd Psalm of David reminds us that we’re all followers. The Lord is my shepherd. He leads. Green pastures, dark valleys, circling enemies – in all these contexts, God is leading. God is present. God is guiding. That’s the source of our courage. We lead by following, you see, which may seem like a contradiction. But courageous leaders in the church are not solitary lone wolves. Dr. Lisa Hancock rightly points out that “...leading courageously is about praying honestly and frankly about the concerns of the world, paying attention to what God calls us to do in response, and then acting with and for God’s abundant life in our communities. Leading courageously is recognizing that we do not have to be in charge to lead well and that, in fact, it is practicing humility and generosity that mark courageous Christian leadership. [adapted from Dr. Lisa Hancock Director of Worship Arts Ministries, UMC Board of Discipleship planning team for “An Adverbial Faith” Worship Series, [https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/miracle-sunday-worship-study-resources#worship-series.](https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/miracle-sunday-worship-study-resources#worship-series)] It is perhaps the great Christian paradox that we lead courageously by following Jesus faithfully.

“But where might we start to lead? Or what ought to be our priorities? The bishops challenge us to think beyond being courageous in our local churches, and even in our local communities. We are encouraged to take a worldview, a systemic view when we consider how to lead courageously. We are encouraged to take an Isaiah-like vision and to let our worship and our spiritual discipline reach into the world around us, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. (Isaiah 58:6 NRSV)

“A high and difficult calling, to be sure. And yet this is who we have always been. Our founder, John Wesley, from the beginnings of the Methodist movement set about challenging the oppressive systems on his time, sought to abolish slavery, and to lift those marginalized by industrialization and unfair and unsustainable labor practices. We have always been a church who sought to bring transformation to the world, not simply of individuals or of the church. Our baptism vows call us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. To lead courageously is to acknowledge that this vow is not only about protecting ourselves, but about challenging those powers at work in the world and to invite others to find the freedom that Christ can bring.

Even here, especially here, in the hard labor of leading the church courageously, God will meet us, will make the divine presence known and thus strengthen our courage as we seek to do what seems impossible for us. And the light we follow begins to shine in and through us, that we might all the more love boldly, serve joyfully and lead courageously, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. [3 ¶s adapted from Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries, UMC Board of Discipleship planning team for “An Adverbial Faith” Worship Series, [https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/miracle-sunday-worship-study-resources#worship-series.](https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/miracle-sunday-worship-study-resources#worship-series)] Amen.