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Date: February 22, 2015
Sermon Title: Jesus, Help Me!
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Psalm 23; The Lord's Prayer

Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom
And the power
And the glory,
Forever

A word about today's sermon. To one degree or another, we've all been worried about Islamic fundamentalism, certainly since 9/11, when the most virulent fundamentalism morphed into terrorism right at our front door. We wanted to believe that our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan put that threat in its place, far away. Instead, as I wrote in my "White Paper, we are all war-weary and terror-wary."

My White Paper is called "Christianity, Islam, and Us," and for good or ill, I've been working on it since last summer, since the beheading of American James Foley. You may remember we even had our own little memorial service for Foley, and I knew then that I needed to put my thoughts together about Islam, about war, about us. As summer turned to fall and fall to winter, the terrorism grew worse, daily more barbaric.

My White Paper is dedicated to Kenji Goto and Kayla Mueller, two young Christians who tried to bring the love of Christian faith to those horrific areas ruled by Islamic terrorists. In that dedication, I write, "Kayla and Kenji . . . lived with faith, died in faith, and live again by faith," and I included the promise of Jesus, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." I believe that 100 percent. Our worry isn't for them; Kenji and Kayla are triumphant with God, blessed, at peace, joyful, as are those past, present, and future, martyred by this great evil.

Our worry is for us, now, a world enveloped by terrorism beyond comprehension. My White Paper is a very humble attempt to offer some comprehension. I provide a very rudimentary introduction to Islam. I tackle the silly debate about what to call the enemy. I offer a Christian perspective on war, and I give out specific recommendations:

We are at war; we can't do it alone. The Muslim world and religion must tackle their own internal enemies. Islam itself must embrace the critical thinking of a full reformation. Christianity needs to revive. We need, each of us, to decide what it means to be an American and a Christian and to stand up for it. If we're at war, we need to conduct ourselves according to the best of our faith and not the worst of our humanity.

One of the first people to read it wrote to me immediately. I have the e-mail right here. It says, "David . . . I am speechless to the greatness and sensitivity of what you have written. Thank you for sharing. Your brilliance astounds me." Well, I should mention that was written by my baby sister!

More seriously, I urge you to read it, wrestle through the issues with me, get back to me, even help me. Today's sermon builds on this topic, the topic of our age: what do we do about evil?

Thank you.

It was about 1978. I was a pastor in Forest Hills, Queens, and a church member had a big party at his apartment overlooking the Long Island Expressway. He was a longtime newspaper editor with *The New York Daily News*. Halfway through the party, he gathers everybody around, and he looks directly at me and says, "The problem with you folks" (he was referring to clergy), "the problem with you folks is all you worry about are Communists. You see Communism everywhere. Forget it, Communism is dead. You want to worry about something? Worry about Islamic fundamentalism."

As I said, that was 1978. I didn't know what the heck he was talking about. This was long before 9/11 or the first Gulf War. Long before any of us had to know about Sunnis, Shiites, Sharia law, jihad. Maybe a few of us had read the Koran in some comparative religion course in freshman year in college. But that was it. And my friend was telling me, in 1978, "You want to worry about something, worry about Islamic fundamentalism."

Then, in the '90s, I read a book by an Algerian Muslim woman journalist, threatened with death by the Islamic fundamentalists terrorizing her own country. In that book, she told of mosques in Algeria and throughout the Middle East being taken over by fundamentalist imams from Saudi Arabia and mosques being used to stockpile weapons and hide terrorists. That was 20 years ago.

Alida reminded me the other day that the teenagers in our youth groups have lived every minute of their lives with America at war. And now we are at a new war against an enemy we'd barely heard of a few months ago, ISIS, today's incarnation of the very threat my newspaper friend warned me about in 1978.

We've watched them in action. It's easy enough because they love self-promotion and marketing. They videotape all those horrors. Whatever you conceive to be the lowest of the low, that's how low they get.

This time, the enemy has made an even greater effort than usual to target Christians, the innocent, and Americans with a savagery of Biblical proportions. If we were sitting at a bar or with friends at work or watching the news on TV or at a backyard barbeque, this conversation might be easier. We could bluster and curse, vent our anger, and pound our fists.

It is difficult for even the most dedicated pacifist to see the horrors of ISIS and not want to use our power to save the innocent and defeat the evil. But we're not at a bar or in our backyard. We all made the choice to come to church this morning, and we've chosen a church that believes in prayer, that loves the Scriptures, that tirelessly preaches the "Good News," that endlessly promotes God's love.

Oh, wait! I've got my papers mixed up. That's not today's sermon. That's what I preached on September 14, word for word. By November 9, I was in a better mood. I preached a whole sermon about "Peace." We even ended that Sunday all singing this together:

*Gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Gonna lay down my sword and shield
Ain't gonna study war no more.*

*I ain't gonna study war no more,
I ain't gonna study war no more,
Study war no more.*

Little did I know those would be "the good old days." That was November, just around Veteran's Day. Peace was in the air. Thanksgiving was around the corner. Christmas was soon to come. Seems a long time ago.

Now, here we are, the drums of war are banging and—let's get the ugly fact out of the way—I can't see any way out of confronting ISIS and all its Hydra-like heads other than head-on, full-force. I don't like saying that in conversation during the week. I don't like writing that in my White Paper; but it feels even worse saying in a Sunday sermon. Just seven days ago, 168 hours ago, in this very church, from this very pulpit, Alida preached a beautiful sermon based on 1 Corinthians 13 about the power of love. That Scripture begins with St. Paul's promise, "Let me show you a better way," *a better way*, and that "better way" is the way of love, so much so that St. Paul reaches a spiritual crescendo, declaring, "So faith . . . hope . . . and love abide, but the greatest of these is love . . . for love never ends." Love is the better way.

Don't you wish you were in church last Sunday instead of today? Instead, you're stuck with me wondering about firing up our F-16s, arming the Kurds, helping the Egyptians, speeding up our Special Ops, putting boots on the ground, and taking on the maddest madmen of our lifetime.

"Jesus, help me." Maybe that should be my prayer this morning. "Jesus, help me." Or maybe it should be your prayer, since you're stuck listening. "Jesus, help me." Those were the last words of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians last Sunday on a beach in Libya, just before the Islamic terrorists took their lives. "Jesus, help me." Maybe it should be our church-wide, religion-wide, nationwide, worldwide prayer, as we decide the road ahead.

Tuesday night I watched Bill O'Reilly. He had two clergy on, a Baptist pastor from Texas. A Catholic priest from New York City. O'Reilly was exhorting the clergy of America to demand war, to use this Sunday to pound their pulpits for war, send a message to the White House.

Truthfully, I didn't mind O'Reilly. In comparison with the clergy, he was measured, thoughtful. Plus, his career is opinion shared loudly. What I minded were the clergy, Christian pastors. The Baptist guy—he was absolutely giddy with war fever. He was so happy, with a big grin, to be on nationwide TV, sending our young people off to war. I was ashamed of him.

The road ahead to war, whatever shape it takes, is not a time for giddiness. The road ahead will be very much like the popular movie "American Sniper," which I mention in the White Paper. My family has already kicked me for spoiling the movie by telling the ending. Today I'll be a little more circumspect. Let me just say that "American Sniper" shows us that the war just fought and the war down the road are much the same. There will be good guys and bad guys, and even the good guys will pay a heavy price.

There are a lot of commercials on TV now for charities helping our wounded soldiers. Watch those commercials very carefully. Look hard at the soldiers and their wives. They paid a heavy price. Our lacrosse boys in this church help raise \$100,000 every Thanksgiving weekend to help wounded soldiers. Go to their lacrosse tournament. See those soldiers and their families. They paid a heavy price.

Remember our "Field of Flags" just outside this window, the last one two years ago: 6,600 flags stuck in the ground, one for each precious American life taken in war. They paid a heavy price. Go to see "American Sniper." Watch it carefully. The road ahead will require a heavy price.

I was a Baptist pastor for many years, and whenever Baptist clergy got together, one of them would shout, "Is there any word from the Lord?" echoing the Old Testament. "Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jeremiah 37:17) Does God have anything to say to a world besieged, terrified, where the most innocent are the most brutalized? Does God have anything to say

to us with our anger rising, with war on the horizon? "Is there any word from the Lord?"

I chose for today two exceedingly familiar Scriptures, perhaps the most famous of Scriptures: the 23rd Psalm from the Old Testament and The Lord's Prayer from the New Testament. Both confront evil head on. The 23rd Psalm proclaims, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . . Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."

And Jesus tells us to pray,
"Lead us NOT into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For THINE is the kingdom
And the power
And the glory."

Two extraordinary bold Scriptures. Both tell us to overcome evil, trust God, and not be afraid. The 23rd Psalm in particular is flat-out "cocky," in a good way: confident, brash, head held high, back straight, full-speed ahead. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

Heck, most of us live in the "valley of the shadow of death." If we're over 50, if we drive on Rt. 95, or if we have to go to war, the valley of the shadow of death is very real, very personal, very near. It's not abstract.

During our invasion of Iraq, my son's best friend was serving as an army officer. He's a West Point graduate. We kept in touch a lot those early days of the war. He told me how the young soldiers were clamoring to be baptized, to get right with God, to be ready because the valley of the shadow of death was always just around the corner, over the next sand dune. We sent hundreds, maybe thousands of care packages to our soldiers at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and along with the junk food and toiletries, they got a copy of one of my books. Many of them wrote back, e-mailing me from their battle lines, wanting to know more about God, Christ, faith, and forgiveness, wondering were they O.K. in God's sight.

The Bible's answer is, when you're close to "death valley," God is with you. And then it offers this wonderful image, "Thou preparest a table before me right smack dab in the presence of mine enemies." How's that for boldness? Death valley is nearby, your enemies are all around, and God sits you down for a banquet. That's confidence.

In late March, I've devoting two Sunday sermons to a real close look at death and dying, so I won't get into it today. Only to say this: God tells us to "fear no evil." The Scripture is not minimizing death or sorrow or loss or war. It is minimizing fear and evil

Jesus, as always, is more personal. The Old Testament focuses on Israel, the nation, the people, the community, the group. Together, "fear no evil." Sit in front of your enemies with confidence. Don't worry. But Jesus is personal. His miracles are personal, almost always one-on-one. His teachings are personal, as though he's looking each person in the eye. And here, in his Lord's Prayer, he speaks to you and to me in a practical, realistic way: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." *Deliver us from evil.* That's a very humble admission: I need help. Evil is all around me. It is strong and dangerous. I can't handle it on my own. I don't trust myself to be near it. "Deliver" me, "Lead" me away from evil.

The prospect of war puts us dead up against evil. The terrorists of ISIS and Boko Haram have mastered the art of evil. They claim it, own it, live it, love it. To defeat that evil we will have to enter into the very hell of their world. That's our paradox today as Christians and as Americans. The Bible is very clear about evil. We're told to not fear it, but we're also told to avoid it, shun it, turn from it, have nothing to do with it. And HATE it!

And so, as I close this sermon, do I offer you any hope? Actually, I'm very hopeful. The Book of Proverbs has a powerful verse, perhaps it really is "the word of the Lord for today," Proverbs 24:20, "for the evil man has no future hope." *No future hope.* Today can seem bleak, now is difficult, the present may be full of evil, but evil has "no future hope." But in the meantime, we have to get through the "valley of the shadow of death" today.

Friday I went to the movies to see "Timbuktu," one of the favorites for an Oscar tonight as Best Foreign Film. I would urge you to go to see it. Timbuktu is the legendary city in Mali, West Africa, a city of scholarship and elegance and history, as people live out their quiet lives of faith and dignity. Until ISIS comes to town. Islamic terrorists, terrorizing one of the most Islamic places on earth. What unfolds is everything we know and fear, as evil takes root in the present of today in Timbuktu. And we see the evil as it really is: insidious, quotidian, a slow descent into one of Dante's circles of Inferno.

We see its power and its silliness, its vision and its hypocrisy, its horror and its emptiness. But that's the minor part of the story. The major parts are the stories of courage, resistance, freedom, and real faith, not perverted faith, but Godly faith, as one by one, the people of Timbuktu prove to us that "the

evil man has no future hope." The things that Christians and Americans and even the people of Timbuktu believe in are lasting.

The things that evil believes in are not lasting: vileness is not lasting, fear is not lasting, death is not lasting. Their stock in trade, their essence, their creed, their God-hating religion is not lasting. The future belongs to us.

Let's stand and sing this powerful hymn with as much faith as we can muster:

"Once to Every Man and Nation"

*Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision, offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever, 'twixt that darkness and that light.*

*Then to side with truth is noble, when we share her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 'tis prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses while the coward stands aside,
Till the multitude make virtue of the faith they had denied.*

*By the light of burning martyrs, Christ, Thy bleeding feet we track,
Toiling up new Calv'ries ever with the cross that turns not back;
New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth,
They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.*

*Though the cause of evil prosper, yet the truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong;
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.*