

Scripture Reading: Psalm 23

The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not ^[a]want. ²He makes me to lie down in ^[b]green pastures; He leads me beside the ^[c]still waters. ³He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness. For His name's sake. ⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For Thou *art* 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 runs over. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will ^[d]dwell in the house of the LORD ^[e]Forever.

This is word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“Knowing the 23rd”

Sometimes I think that the most challenging passages to study or to preach, for that matter, are the ones that we are all so familiar with, for we think we know them and our ingrained associations dictate that knowledge. The 23rd psalm is the most familiar and beloved of all the psalms. When we hear, *“The Lord is my shepherd”*, memories rush to the surface...memories rush to the surface of our minds of times long ago when we may have committed it memory, but more likely of times when we attended funerals where we’ve said the immortal words together, or of times of near-death crises where, as Craig Barnes says, *“the psalm has tumbled out of ours or another’s lips precisely because it was a crisis and it seemed like the appropriate thing to say”*.¹ We know this psalm. We’ve seen it needlepointed on pillows or framed on painted wall hangings, or imprinted on sympathy cards. But it is for this reason that it is very appropriate for us to step back and with fresh eyes endeavor to take a serious look at this time-honored psalm, on this, the 4th Sunday of Easter, known by the church as Good Shepherd Sunday.

Looking at the beginning of the psalm. In the ancient world, the title, “Shepherd” was not simply describing a person who had the earthy and non-glamorous job of leading and tending to the needs of sheep, but it was a political title. Kings were known as the shepherds of their people. They were the ones who were to provide for, protect and lead them. Often, the kings didn’t do well at this. Instead they were greedy and self-centered, benefiting at the expense of their people. So, the writer of psalm 23, believed by most to be David, was quite possibly making a political statement when he said, *“The **LORD** is **MY** shepherd!”*² He was looking around and saying unequivocally that the rest of you are NOT! The Lord alone was his King, the one who directed him, to whom he gave his allegiance and trust. TRUST. TRUST

¹Craig Barnes. *“Walking through a Dark Valley”*. https://nationalpres.org/sites/default/files/sermon_bulletins/2002.05.26.Barnes.pdf (accessed 4-29-20).

²Shannon Kershner. *“Sermon. Psalm 23”* <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/112514.html> (accessed 10-11-17)

And when we claim this psalm for ourselves, we too are saying that there is no one and no thing which is Lord of our lives other than God... no friend or boss, not Wall Street, not Hollywood, not our jobs, not the Internet, not the military nor our government, nor even our family. We are saying that our ultimate allegiance belongs first and foremost to the Holy One of Israel, our God.

Now, that's a big statement, especially these days, because there are many other "shepherds" to follow, a lot of pressure on us to submit to them. And these false shepherds tend to be cultural sources of power, and we're tempted to graze on their promised securities, regardless of the fact that our souls become dry and worn out, weakened rather than nourished when we do. The psalm calls us to say 150 words about the first 2. The psalm calls us to, "when each day breaks, let all distraction and empty talk be silenced, and to let the first thought and the first word be about him to whom our whole life belongs."³ *"The Lord is my Shepherd"*

Let's look now toward the middle of the psalm. There we find what might be called the literary and theological climax...four words, *"Thou art with me"*. And in fact, these ARE at the center of the psalm! There are 26 words before the word "thou" and 26 words following it in the original Hebrew.⁴ Certainly, not a poetic mistake. Here also the pronouns change. The 3 verses prior to it speak of God in the 3rd person, but here at the center, the psalmist talks to God in the very intimate 1st person, "thou".

The phrase, *"Thou art with me"* is that to which the entire psalm points, in fact, that to which the entire Gospel points...honestly the direction of the whole divine plan. My professor David Johnson recently wrote, *"The best way to determine what God has to do with us is to listen to God's own testimony in Scripture. The first and most important of those testimonies is this: God is with us."*⁵ The God whose heart's desire is to be in relationship with us IS WITH US. David, the psalmist, would have known the Levitical testimony, *"I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and*

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*. (New York: Harper One; 1978), 43.

⁴ James Limburg, *Psalms* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

⁵ David Johnson. "What has God to Do with Us? God is with us" https://twitter.com/presoutlook/status/1255491011192721409?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7C... (accessed 4-29-20)

you shall be my people” (Lev 26:11-12), and WE know that God indeed came and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth many centuries later and bore the name, Emmanuel which means, “*God with us*” (Matt 1:23)

The promise of “*Thou art with me*”, is where the psalm gets its gritty power for inherent in the statement is the recognition that no matter what, no matter why, no matter where we go grazing astray, a little grass here, and then further away, and then a bit further until we’re lost...no matter, the Shepherd, our King, WILL never leave or abandon us. It is a promise that we can stand on. James Howell says it well, “*God doesn't shelter us from trouble. God doesn't magically manipulate everything to suit us. But the glorious ‘with’ at the center is unassailable, unchangeable, the only fact that matters*”.⁶

It is from this center then that the additional consequences described in the psalm, “*I shall not want*” and “*I shall fear no evil*”, can be drawn. Because God is with us, we won’t lack for anything... for anything that is important anyway. (*repeat*) That’s what’s meant by “*resting in green pastures and lying beside still waters.*” Our souls rather than being anxious, and needing to worry about what we do not have, will be *restored by* “*God with us*”. And... we can begin to see that the evil in the world looks differently. It is transformed. The darkest valley becomes that which we walk through to the pasture on other side when God is walking with us. A valley, you see, is not designed to be a place to reside in. A valley is a passageway. And it is SO much less threatening when the Lord who was once dead, and NOW LIVES, AND who is our advocate is with us and helping to carry the load. We are able to then *feast at the table in the presence of evil*, in the presence of all that frightens us, sickens us, persecutes us, threatens us. “*Thou art with me*”.

So, then, if “*The LORD IS my shepherd*” is the beginning of the psalm and “*THOU art with me*” is in the middle, the end of the psalm should not surprise us at all. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*” In Hebrew the word for “follow” might be better translated “pursue”. Our Shepherd

⁶ James Howell. “*Commentary on the 23rd Psalm*” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3292. (accessed 10-12-17).

pursues us all our lives even when we are running away. And while death naturally is the end of any living creature's life, we are instead assured that we will dwell and be with God forever, not because of who we are, but because of who our Shepherd is. *(pause)*

This week one of my friends from years past let me and others know that she was really having some difficulty during the last days. She did not say what was the cause, but she intimated that she thought it was this coronavirus crisis that we've all been going through. She described having significant anxiety and nervousness manifested with physical symptoms consistent with the same. She felt it was getting to the point of a debilitating situation, overwhelming her. She compared it to having once been on a train that entered a tunnel. Everything had been light and airy with the beautiful mountain scenery going by, but suddenly an uncomfortable sense of dread took over as the train went into the inky blackness of the tunnel. The longer she and her companions traveled in the tunnel, the harder it was for her to remain calm without any visual cues to reassure her, without being able to see what lie ahead.

Friends, this has been a difficult journey we've been on during these last weeks, and our lives have been really disrupted, not to mention the enormous sadness that has been a pall laying over it all. There are times and events in life which do plunge us into valleys, or places of darkness and great grief or anxiety. Yet this is when we can turn to a psalm like the beloved 23rd, and, contrary to what we may have thought we knew about it, find it to affirm the faith on which we stand. For it is a psalm of trust, not only of comfort. It has been written and preserved in our Holy book so that we can say it and use it during our daily living, not simply for times of death or end of life crises. For friends, all the days of our lives, our shepherd, our king, whom we hold above all else, is pursuing us through our highs and lows, our valleys and plains, whatever lies ahead of us, to shower us with goodness and mercy such that we WILL be with him and he with us, and we can affirm that we will dwell together forever.

Let us pray.

The LORD is our Shepherd, we SHALL not want. He maketh us to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth us beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth our souls: he leadeth us in the

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paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we WILL fear no evil: for THOU art with us; thy rod and thy staff they comfort us. Thou preparest a table before us in the presence of our enemies: thou anointest our heads with oil; our cups run over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy SHALL follow us all the days of our lives: and we WILL dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.