

PSALMS READING: *Psalm 23*

The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the 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 dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.

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

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Ezekiel 34: 11-16

"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the fountains, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and upon the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on fat pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice.

This is the word of the Lord...THANKS BE TO GOD.

GOSPEL READING: John 10:10-18

[Jesus said] 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. 11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

This is the word of the Lord...**Thanks Be to God.**

“Dwelling in the 23rd”

Sometimes the most challenging passages to study are the ones with which we are all so familiar, because well,....we think we know them! 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 from maybe our childhoods when we learned the ancient words by heart, but more likely from times when we’ve attended funerals where we’ve heard the word sung, read or recited together. In fact, I think of all the funerals that I have officiated, only one or two did not include Psalm 23. So, it is for this reason that it is appropriate for us to step back today, on Good Shepherd Sunday, and seriously look at it, study it, noting its power for us not solely on the occasion of death but in the midst of our living.¹

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. Often, the earthly kings didn’t do this well. Instead, they were greedy and self-centered, benefiting themselves at the expense of their people. So, the writer of psalm 23, believed by most to be David, was making a political, even a rebellious 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 he listened to, to whom he gave his allegiance and trust.

So, when we claim this psalm for ourselves in our lives, we too are saying that there is no one and no thing that 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, not our political party or candidate, not even a member of our family. We are saying that our ultimate allegiance belongs first and foremost to the Holy One of Israel, our God. This psalm calls us to say 150 words about the first 2.

¹Shannon Kershner. “*Sermon. Psalm 23*” <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/112514.html> (accessed 10-11-17)

²Shannon Kershner.

Now, that's a big statement, because there is a lot of pressure on us these days to submit to these other shepherds. It's tempting to graze on their promises, to listen to their enticing voices. And in fact, it is hard to even recognize the voice of the Shepherd amid the cacophony of other voices. But in regard to this, I will remind you that if the voice is speaking liberation rather than oppression, if it is speaking of feeding children and housing families and providing help for those who cannot help themselves, if it is celebrating those who are restored to a place of wholeness and given opportunities to begin again, then it is likely the voice of the Good Shepherd. If the voice urges hospitality and invitation to the one who is on the outside, or offers forgiveness to the one who has done wrong, or is urging generosity not just of money, time and talent, but of joy, laughter and hope, it is likely the Good Shepherd. If our ears can stay attuned and minds focused on this voice...well then...Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, that to hear and follow, we need *"let all distraction and **empty** talk be silenced and let our first thoughts and the first words each day be about the ONE to whom our whole life belongs."*³ *"The **LORD**... is my Shepherd"*

The psalm continues in its rebellious nature with its next statement too: *"I shall NOT want"*. If there is an adjective that we all might use in describing our culture, it is "materialistic". We know it is not true, but yet we seem to always convince ourselves that there is something that we NEED. In 2020, US households spent an average of \$65,098 on consumer goods, contributing to 30.3% of worldwide retail sales.⁴ Thomas Merton is quoted as saying, *"Even though there's a certain freedom in our society, it's the freedom to choose your product, but not the freedom to do without it."*⁵ Indeed, this psalm, if we live it, gives us the power to change, to push back against the indoctrination of need. The psalm claims that God's generosity will provide us all that is necessary to live abundantly. It claims too that we can choose to be satisfied with what God provides and not get caught up in the materialism and idolatry of stuff. Because we can, because we won't lack for anything...anything important

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

⁴ <https://gitnux.org/american-materialism-statistics/#:~:text=A%20significant%2070%25%20of%20Americans,30.3%25%20of%20worldwide%20retail%20sales>. (accessed 4-19-24).

⁵Thomas Merton. Quoted in: Shannon Kershner. *Sermon. 'Psalm 23'* <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/112514.html> (accessed 4-19-24).

anyway...we can *“rest in green pastures and lie beside still waters”*. *“The Lord is my Shepherd. I SHALL NOT WANT.”*

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/you art with me”*. In the original Hebrew, they are at truly the center with 26 words before the word “Thou” and 26 words following it.⁶ Certainly, not a poetic mistake. Here also even the pronouns change. 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, 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.”*⁷ The God whose heart’s desire is to be in relationship with us IS “Emmanuel, God WITH US”.

The promise of *“Thou art with me”*, is where the psalm gets its gritty power because inherent in the statement is the recognition that no matter what, no matter why, no matter where we go grazing, a little grass here, and then further away, and then a bit further until we’re lost, our King, our Good Shepherd, WILL never leave or abandon us, not even in the most dangerous places, not even in the shadow of death. THIS is a promise that we can stand on and in which we ground our lives. James Howell says, *“God doesn’t shelter us from trouble. God doesn’t magically manipulate everything to suit us. But the glorious ‘with’ at the center of the psalm is unassailable, unchangeable, the only fact that really matters”*.⁸

Indeed, “thou art with me” makes the evil in the world look different. Evil is transformed. The darkest valley becomes that which we walk through to the pasture on other side. The valley becomes a passageway, not a place in which to linger. We are able to *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”*.

⁶ James Limburg, *Psalms* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

⁷ 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)

⁸ James Howell. “Commentary on the 23rd Psalm” https://ww.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3292. (accessed 10-12-17).

It is from this center then that two additional consequences can be affirmed. First: *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life"*. In Hebrew, the word for "follow" might be better translated "pursue". Our Shepherd pursues us all our lives even when we are running away. What good news is this since we do seem to run away a lot! In fact, it sometimes seems that the we run fastest when we have lost our way!⁹ And the second consequence: *"I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever"* ... While death naturally is the end of our earthly lives, we are instead assured that we will dwell with God from now and forever, from NOW and forever not because of who we are, but because of who our Shepherd is.

Friends, the bottom line is this...the world is a beautiful place, but also a fearful place filled with pain and suffering. *I recall once a woman describing to me her emotional situation as being like having been on a train that entered a tunnel. Everything had been light and airy with the beautiful mountain scenery going by, but then suddenly became uncomfortably dark with a sense of heavy overwhelming dread. The longer she 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.*

Yes, the bottom line is that our world can be a tough place, but despite it all, this psalm, this time-honored 23rd psalm, reminds us, assures us that we have a Good Shepherd who became one of us in order to provide us a place where we can simply rest beside still waters, and never finally be lacking. We'll never be alone, never abandoned, never travel down a path where he will not be with us, where his goodness, mercy and love cannot follow us.¹⁰ The psalm is then not just for the context of the death but can be helpful to us in reshaping our living. Keeping it before us can each day give us peace by reminding us of the kind of world that God is bringing—a world in which our cups will abundantly overflow and in which we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

⁹Rollo May. Quoted in: Craig Barnes. "Sheep on the run: Psalm 23". Christian Century (2002:Feb 13) (accessed 4-19-24).

¹⁰ Scott Hoezee. Psalm 23 Commentary. <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-05-06/psalm-23-6/> (accessed 4-19-24).