

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

4th after Easter: May 3, 2020

Text:

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

Reflection:

I can imagine that you have heard hundreds of sermons preached on this most beloved psalm, Psalm 23! I can imagine many of you memorized Psalm 23; You know it by heart. It was the first thing I memorized when I became a Christian. Songs have been written, stories told, and movies produced to bring its beautiful, peaceful, and reassuring images to life for us “moderns” who have probably never tended a flock of sheep. I don’t personally know a shepherd, do you? And I don’t know B.C. but green pastures in Ontario are usually filled with cows, not sheep. Yet when we sing “The Lord is my Shepherd” in church, the visions I have that come with the words are always full of peace and free of fear.

The central image of today’s scripture is a shepherd. “The Lord is my shepherd.” In this simple opening line, the Psalmist is clear about the goal and focus, the centre and purpose of life. There is no rival loyalty, no competing claim. Only you Yahweh are my shepherd. This is a powerful proclamation. The Psalm expresses maximum confidence in God.

The very well-known Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann in his book, “The Message of the Psalms,” begins his commentary on Psalm 23 with these words: “It is almost pretentious to comment on this psalm. The grip it has on biblical spirituality is deep and genuine. It is such a simple statement that it can bear its own witness without comment. It is, of course, a psalm of confidence. It recounts in detail, by means of rich metaphors, a life lived in trustful receptivity of God’s gifts.”

It is God’s companionship that transforms every situation. It does not mean that there are no deathly valleys, no enemies, no COVID-19, but they are not capable of hurt. Psalm 23 knows that evil is present in the world, but it is not feared. Confidence in God is the source of a life of peace and joy. I deeply agree with Dr. Brueggemann’s comments, and I have discovered in my own life that God’s gifts are best understood and experienced when I fully trust God.

There is something stunning in nature about mothers and children knowing one another’s voices. Research shows that blindfolded human mothers can identify their infants in group settings by the sound of the cry. It is awesome to think, extending such a principle quantitatively that the God of the universe knows us by our names and responds to our needs. There is something deeply moving about the notion that, independent as we may choose to be, deeper yet within us is the longing to hear ourselves called and claimed by the voice of God. St. Augustine said something similar when he wrote, “Oh God, you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary comments on Psalm 23 with these words: "To be sure, it is appropriate that Psalm 23 be read and heard in the midst of death and dying. It may be more important, however, that this psalm be read and heard as a psalm about living, for it puts daily activities such as eating and drinking and seeking security in a radically God-centered perspective that challenges our usual way of thinking."

For me, Jesus is the Good Shepherd of my life – God sits me down, has compassion on my hungry spirit, leads me, feeds me, helps me to rest and be refreshed, and then looks in my eyes and whispers, "Now take up your cross and follow me." God can always be trusted to be with us, to guide us, and to give us rest and peace.

The Psalmist draws a stunning conclusion about God in this statement: "I shall not want." There is nothing we lack because God is our shepherd. We have no other yearnings or desires that fall outside the gifts of God because God makes us to lie down in green pastures, because God leads us beside peaceful waters, and because God guides us in right pathways.

God shepherds by providing all that we need, which is not the same as all that we want. The good shepherd does not abandon us in times of suffering and danger such as those we are passing through in this global pandemic. God stands with us as we are experiencing trying times, even though we are still fearful and anxious and don't know what tomorrow will bring. But at this very moment and in this very place, God calls us by name and guides us in right pathways. We are getting there. In a world in peril we see a ray of hope that we are overcoming this pandemic. In a world in peril, God, our shepherd, stills our fears and gives us peace and hope. God's steadfast love is trustworthy. Always. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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