

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 7, 2017
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:14, 36-47
Psalm 23
I Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 23, is one of the most known and loved passages in all of Scripture. And for good reason: it testifies to God's loving, gracious care in our lives. It is intensely personal.

Psalm 23 was known as a "pilgrimage song," because it was sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, pilgrims whose *physical* journey mirrored the *spiritual* journey of life.

The same is true for us moderns, all these years later. Our physical journey through life is part of a spiritual odyssey, a journey where persons wander through both the *lush* times and the *arid* times of life, searching for the presence of God in each.

What we find along this journey is God's constant presence with us. The biblical writers employed the metaphor of the shepherd to communicate this reality. Using Psalm 23, I'd like to explore four insights into the metaphor of the Lord as Shepherd this morning.

I. *To speak of the LORD as shepherd is to say that God provides our needs (vv. 1-2).*

Shepherds in the Middle East often used the expression “to set the table” when referring to preparing the fields for grazing. Some of the things a shepherd would do included uprooting poisonous weeds and thorns, and ridding the area of enemies of the sheep, such as snakes and scorpion nests. In the evening, once the sheep were corralled, the injured or sickly ones were separated from the others and treated with oil and a curative drink made of fermented material and herbs sweetened with honey.

This ancient practice, and the images it calls to mind, reflects God’s loving care of us and His provision for *our* needs. And what God provides is astonishing when you return to the text of the psalm and when you consider the geography of Palestinian shepherding.

Green pastures were almost nonexistent. *Still* waters were rarely seen. The dark valleys were often surrounded by craggy rocks, the perfect playground for thieves and robbers intent on violence and murder.

But as the loving Shepherd of your life, God provides for your needs. You shall not be in want. He is faithful. Many of you here this morning could testify that you have found Him faithful again and again in your experience.

II. To speak of the LORD as shepherd is to say that God guides us (vv. 2-3).

In this fast-paced world in which we live, many know the frustration of taking the wrong road in life. A few choices (especially early in life) can set us on a long-range course that lacks direction or leads us in a dangerous and destructive direction.

Even in our Christian walk, there are times when we make the best choice we can with the information we have, but things don't turn out very well.

In such times there is always the possibility of being restored to the right path. There is no such thing as a "dead end" road.

All that is required is that we carve out time and space in our lives to listen for the voice of our Shepherd. As the sheep on the hills of Palestine trusted their shepherd implicitly, so also those of us seeking the road to abundant life must trust the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

Author G.A. Smith tells a story of watching shepherds with their sheep one day in the Judean countryside. He says:

Sometimes we enjoyed our noonday rest beside one of those Judean wells to which three or four shepherds come down with their flocks. The flocks mixed together with each other, and we wondered how each shepherd would get his own [flock] again. But after the watering and the playing were over, the shepherds one by one went up different sides of the valley, and each called out his peculiar call. And the sheep of each drew out of the crowd to their own shepherd. (G.A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, p. 210-211).

When you think about it, our real challenge in this life is very simple. It is found in the words of our collect for today. The secret of life consists in hearing Jesus' voice when he calls us by name, and following where he leads.

III. To speak of the LORD as shepherd is to say that God supports us and stands with us in times of need (vv. 4-5).

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, noted expert and researcher on death and dying, tells a story of a little boy who was in the final stages of cancer. Dr. Ross asked him to draw a picture that showed her how he was feeling about his illness. He drew a dark and scary self-portrait with thunderclouds in the sky. Then he drew a cannon, which was pointed directly at his heart.

When Dr. Ross saw this, she did not say anything or try to change the boy's feelings. Instead, she quietly took the picture and began sketching on it. She drew a figure of herself in a white coat, standing close to the little boy in the picture, facing the cannon with him, her arms securely around his shoulders.

A few days later, the little boy had drawn another picture, on his own initiative. In this picture the sun was shining, flowers were everywhere, and his self-portrait had a huge smile on his face.

In this simple interchange between a doctor and a little boy, we have a window into Psalm 23 and the love of God for us. We have a picture of the God

who wraps his arms around us as we prepare to enter perhaps the most fearful experience of all -- death.

But there is more. The phrase, “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” (KJV and some others) is an inaccurate translation of the original Hebrew. In the Hebrew, the phrase is more properly rendered “valley of deep darkness.” It has the connotation of a place of fear and danger, but is not limited merely to the experience of death.

Each of us finds ourselves in this valley of darkness at some stage of life. You know what it means to be afraid, to be confused, to feel a sense of hopelessness. But in those times, we have this assurance: God does not always take away the dark cannons pointing at our lives, but instead stands with us in our troubles, placing his dependable arms around our shoulders. We still walk through the valley of deep darkness. *But we do not walk alone.* He is with us. His rod and His staff, they comfort us.

IV. To speak of the LORD as shepherd is to say that God is our gracious host (vv. 5-6).

The prepared table, the anointed head, overflowing cup, and special blessing of dwelling in God’s house remind us of God’s gracious hospitality to us.

Verse 5 has always been a bit of a conundrum for me. “Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of my enemies” (KJV and others). Many believers

through the years have used this verse as justification to look with contempt on their enemies. Even worse, some have used this to convince themselves that *God* has contempt for their enemies, and will bless and care for them while they look on and gloat that their enemies are left “on the outside looking in,” so to speak.

But is that what is going on here? Let me offer another possible way to look at this.

The reference here to preparing a table hearkens back to the children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. They got frustrated, and in their frustration they became rebellious, to the point where they angrily asked Moses, “Can God set a table in the wilderness?” (Psalm 78:19).

The psalmist here not only affirms God’s faithfulness to the people in the past, but also claims that faithfulness for the *present* and the *future*. The psalmist knows what it is like for enemies to pursue him and to seek to do him in.

But in the midst of being pursued by enemies, he discovers a greater truth. He discovers that *he is pursued and overtaken by the goodness and mercy of God*. There is a place for him in God’s house, at God’s table. There is a refuge from the pursuing forces of life. At God’s table he is safe, he is secure, he is at peace. It’s not that God hates his enemies – *but rather that God profoundly loves him!*

To speak of the LORD as Shepherd is to say more than can be contained in many sermons. But you should know this morning that all of this truth from Psalm

23 finds its complete expression in the person of Jesus Christ. All that is implied by our metaphors and truths about the LORD as our shepherd find complete fulfillment in the person of Jesus. He is the Great Shepherd.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, Jesus is our host. He prepares this place of encounter for us. And as we eat and drink, these symbols of bread and wine are a foretaste of the great banquet that is yet to come. And they are God's ongoing promise to us that we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Let us come, then, with faith, and let us go forth determined to follow our Great Shepherd, wherever he may lead us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.