

Psalm 23

A Psalm of David.

1 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.*

Gracious God, our way in the wilderness, guide us by your Word through these forty days, and minister to us with your Holy Spirit, so that we may be reformed, restored, and renewed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There is a lot of changes happening in the world right now. Information about the current pandemic is changing so rapidly that what I know as I am writing this sermon will be outdated and changed, probably drastically, by the time I give it. Between the virus, with all of the fears and concerns for its spread, the orders to isolate ourselves, and people being concerned about their jobs, schoolwork, and the lack of community. There are also the concerns about the economy in general, the stock market, and the availability and distribution of food and other supplies. There's a lot of things to think about, so when I saw the lectionary scriptures for today included Psalm 23 I thought it would be a good choice.

Let's face it, Psalm 23 is certainly the most well-known of the Psalms; in fact, it probably is in the top ten of most known scriptures. At the Lutheran church I went to as a kid we had required memorization of scriptures for Sunday school. If I remember correctly for first or second grade, we had to memorize The Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. For the next year it was Psalm 23 and the Apostle's creed.

I know many churches use Psalm 23 for funerals; That's what I like to do, because I think its words can comfort us in times of trial, fear, and worry, but this is a Psalm about living, not dying. As we go through it you will note that it is about eating, drinking, and finding security. It is very God-centered in its perspective, and it challenges us and our usual ways of thinking. I think it should also be noted that it is not just about our individual assurances but encourages us

to take our place alongside others in God's household. It is about salvation for the community. So, today I wanted to take some time to focus on this lovely piece of poetic scripture.

The first verse always confused me as a kid. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Being young I didn't quite understand the meaning of the comma. Why was I reciting something that said I didn't want the Lord? Aren't we as Christians supposed to want the Lord? Of course, that is not what the Psalmist meant. The NIV Bible does a bit better with their translation; it says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."

In ancient Near Eastern times Kings were considered the shepherds of the people. Their job was to provide life and security. Well, much like back then today's leaders seem to have a hard time doing that. The psalmist is declaring their loyalty to a God that does provide those things, and then goes on to explain what God is doing.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;" Let's stop for just a second to imagine what that looks like. Can you imagine a beautiful meadow, with long green grass and flowers? The image I've come up with is tranquil and calm. I imagine something similar to a little place called Farmer's Community Park, it's few miles west of Winona MN on highway 14. It is a little field with a small brook going through it nestled in the bluffs. The time I visited it left me filled with peace and tranquility. I hope the image in your mind fills you with them as well, but that was not the primary purpose of the verse. The meadow has a stream that empties into a nice clean shallow pond. We think of this as a wonderful pastoral scene (see what I did there?) But it also shows God meeting the psalmist's basic needs. For sheep, the grass is food, and the pond is ideal for drinking.

The next verse says, "He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." The right paths are paths that keep us safe. Paths that lead us to shelter. We know that God will not lead us astray. Even if things look bleak in life, we will be with the Lord in a wonderful kingdom in the end.

Sometimes God leads us through the simplest of decisions. Joseph de Somogyi was a devout Lutheran as well as a scholar. When Nazism began to permeate life in Hungary, he laid his open Hebrew Bible on his university desk. Other professors would ask: "Joseph, is that not Jewish?" "Yes," he would reply. "It is the most Jewish of all things Jewish!" They would challenge his temerity and urge him to be more careful. His response: "I am a Christian. Aren't you?" One evening a policeman appeared at his door. He informed Joseph that he would return later with two Gestapo agents. His advice: "I would appreciate it if you would disappear."

For some time, Joseph lived in hiding with peasants in rural Hungary. His life work lay buried in scholarly manuscripts in an orchard in anticipation of a day when his country would again be free. The Nazi's were defeated, and he returned to his university post. Then the Soviet Union moved against Hungary. One hundred twenty-seven women and children sought safety in the basement of Joseph's villa on the Danube. The target of the Soviet bombers was a munitions factory across the river. Joseph's name soon appeared on the list of those who could be a threat to the communist party.

A conference of Semitic scholars was scheduled in Vienna. Joseph applied for a visa to go. He was refused. After three more refusals he decided to visit personally the office of the individual responsible for all visas. The office was on the fourth floor. He was so angry that he did not take the elevator. He took the stairs to "cool off." At the second landing, he bumped into a former student of his. After a warm embrace, the student asked, "Doctor, what are you doing here? Can I help you?" Then Joseph learned that this former student's fiancé was the personal secretary of the official he had come to see. The student took Joseph to the fourth floor,

introduced him to his fiancé, and instructed her to grant the visa to his old professor. She paled and replied: "You know I can't. His name is on the proscribed list." At that, Joseph's former student said with some emotion: Give the doctor a visa, or cancel our wedding plans." The fiancé, shaken, arose, walked to the window, and stood for a long time. Then she returned to her desk and granted the visa.

When Doctor de Somogyi arrived in Vienna, he found a message from H.H. Rowley, the British Old Testament scholar. It said, "I do not have a position worthy of you, but we have a stipend that can keep you alive until something appropriate comes." That stipend enabled him to survive until a position opened for him. Do you think it was an accident that the doctor took the stairs that day instead of the elevator, or was it a nudge from a God who provides?

Verse four of Psalm 23 is both the structural and theological center of the Psalm. I could try to go into detail about how the Hebrew word for evil and for shepherd are similar, and how the juxtaposition of them leads to poetic alliteration that the English translations can't convey, but for us I think it is more appropriate to recognize that the author is saying that God will protect us from the underworld, what some might call hell. God will protect us from evil if we are willing to follow God like a sheep follows a shepherd.

The second part of verse four says, "your rod and your staff— they comfort me." Have you ever thought about what the author is trying to say here? Are a rod and a staff the same thing? If not, what is the difference between the two, and why does our Lord the shepherd have both? Well a rod is the equivalent of a scepter, an item used to show sovereignty. I feel as Presbyterians this is an illustration that we can get behind, after all, part of our Reformed Tradition is that we believe in the sovereignty of God. The staff on the other hand is the tool of the shepherd to guide the sheep and protect them from predators and their own stupidity: as any sheep farmer will tell you, sheep tend to make bad decisions. The idea that God is in total control and is willing to guide us, through and despite the bad decisions we make, is a comfort indeed.

Verse five continues explaining the generosity of God. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." Although the Psalm's author has moved away from the illustration of the shepherd and the sheep, the image they create can still be related to it. It would almost seem as if they are using an example of a generous host. A host who provides for their guest's bodily needs, the anointing of their head with oil, which was one way to take care of people's hair, to preparing food, and providing so much wine that the cup overflows. Of course, a shepherd is the one who provides for their sheep's needs as well. Any shepherd worth their salt is going to make sure the sheep have enough food, water, and are safe.

One commentator points out that in many of the Psalms the enemies are in direct contention or pursuit of the author. In this Psalm they are mentioned as being present, but that is it. We could assume from this that even though the enemies are close, the psalmist is protected from them by God.

The final verse says, "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." Although the English translation says follow, the verb is actually more active than that. It is more like pursue. God is trying to pursue us and bring goodness and mercy to us.

The "house of the Lord" may have referred to the Temple in the times when this was written, but it would still be theologically correct for us to agree that God is making a place for us, all of us, in God's heavenly kingdom.

We are living in a time of discord, a time of fear and uncertainty, and a time of serious change. It is important for us today to remember that God is unchanging. God is with us wherever we are, and God is looking out for us. Let us continue on in thanks and praise for The Lord is our shepherd. Amen