

“Green Pastures”

By Mark Davies

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[Lectionary: 1 Sam. 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41]

Scripture reading: Psalm 23

When I was a child, each night my mother would sit by my bed and teach me a Psalm. I wonder, how many of you, like me, learned the 23rd Psalm as a child, probably in the King James Version? Let’s say it together.

This evening I wish to focus on the opening verse of that Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” That one verse, I would suggest, encapsulates the entire Hebrew Scripture, the entire Christian Testament, even the entire Koran. If we know this one verse – really know it, not merely with our head but with our heart and hands and feet (or, as Jesus put it, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength (Mark 12:30)) – then we need know nothing else, nothing else of God, nothing else of Jesus, nothing else of all Creation.

We most commonly associate the 23rd Psalm with funeral services, both Jewish and Christian, and appropriately so. But in the end, this scripture is not about death, but about life.

First of all, the psalm tells us that the Lord *is* our shepherd. Nothing we can do, nothing we can say, nothing changes that fact: that the Lord *is* our shepherd. As the psalmist writes:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness will cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139:7-12)

God’s love for us, God’s devotion to us, can never be circumvented or changed or negated. It simply is, now and forever.

Thus, God always loves us, but God does not always like us. Sometimes we are not very likeable, when by our thoughts, words, or deeds we hurt others, and thereby hurt God. So while God is always with us, we are not always with God. Not that those who follow God as their shepherd never sin – if that were true, God’s flock would be a small one indeed. We need, as Wesley called it, sanctifying grace.

But if we accept God as our shepherd, then the psalmist assures us we shall never want. In our heart of hearts, we know this is true. When we strip away all the trappings of consumerism, all the busyness of our lives, we see that. Faced with the imminent death of a loved one, who among us would not give all that we have for her recovery? As God told the rich man who was tearing down his barns to build bigger ones: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12:20) We know this.

God offers us green pastures and prepares a table before us (food to nourish us). God offers us still waters and an overflowing cup (clean water to sustain us). God offers us an escort in right paths, affording us shelter, eluding the dangers of the wilderness, and leading us out of bondage and exile into the Promised Land. As God spoke to Moses, so God speaks to us: “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.” (Exodus 23:20)

So, too, Jesus reminds us:

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:28b-33)

We know this. As the NIB puts it: “God is the only necessity of life!” (NIB, vol. IV, p. 769). Indeed, we know that to provide food and water and shelter and protection lies at the very heart of God. Or, as our psalmist expresses it, God does this “for [God’s] name’s sake.” God does this because this *is* God, what we express when we say that God is love.

In this psalm is bound up the entire history of the Jewish people, our history, of Moses and Isaiah and Job and, for us Christians, of Jesus the Messiah.

In ancient Israel, kings were often called shepherds of their people, so when we proclaim that the Lord is *our* shepherd we are proclaiming our loyalty to God and to God’s kingdom.

But unlike those earthly shepherds, the Lord never fails us. The rod (scepter) of God’s authority and the staff of God’s protection comfort us. Even in the face of death, we need fear no evil – if we accept the Lord as our shepherd, we *will* fear no evil – for God is with us, always, even to the end of the age.

The commentators point out that this word “comfort” appears throughout the writings of Isaiah in exile, telling us here that even if we are rejected and deserted by our family and friends, even though we be cast into exile, God stands by us. As Paul wrote, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Cor. 4:8-9) Indeed, God not only comforts us, but welcomes us into God’s house, anointing our head with oil as an honored guest and placing an overflowing cup in our hands. Even in the midst of our enemies, even the enemies within us, in the wilderness of exile, God prepares a table for us. This is the meaning of shalom: when we are with God, when we are in relationship with God, when God is our shepherd, we are at peace – even in the midst of violence and heartbreak and death, we are at peace, shalom.

As we walk through our darkest valleys, then God accompanies us, seeing us through to the other side. That does not mean we emerge unscathed and unscarred. We do not. And sometime, eventually, we will not emerge alive at all. At some point we will die in the valley of the shadow of death. As my father used to say, none of us will come out of this life alive.

The commentators tell us that the Hebrew word translated as “the valley of the shadow of death” or “the darkest valley” is the same word used in Job 10:22 to describe Sheol, the realm of the dead. Thus, even when we walk into death itself, we will fear no evil because God walks with us. And even then, in death itself, we shall emerge on the other side. In life, in death, in life beyond death, the Lord, our shepherd, remains with us. So Paul could proclaim that

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.... (Rom. 8:37-39)

We and God, you see, are joined at the hip.

Thus, as recorded in the Gospel of John, “this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God....” (John 17:3) “I came,” says Jesus, “that they may have LIFE, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) This psalm is not about death, but about life, abundant life, not about ETERNAL life, but about eternal LIFE, abundant life, life in God.

The Lord *is my* shepherd, but not just mine alone. The Lord is the shepherd of all humanity. This is a communal hymn.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the shepherd and sheep is a metaphor for God and Israel. “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand,” records Psalm 95:7.

So, yes, this psalm is very personal. But it is also very communal.

And what does it mean to live as a community of followers of the Lord our shepherd? It means not only caring for one another and for the stranger among us, not only feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, nursing the sick, visiting the prisoner, and liberating the captive. Indeed, as Christians, to that table that God has prepared for us in the presence of our enemies, we are called by Jesus to, in turn, *invite* those enemies to dine *with* us, at Christ’s table, much as Paul invited his captors in prison. But living in a community of

followers of the Lord our shepherd means something else. It also means understanding and accepting that God's ways are not our ways, and that God's justice is not our justice. Job and Isaiah struggle mightily with this matter. And in parable after parable Jesus reminds us that, while, like any good Jew, we may argue with God, in the end we can never understand God. The parables of the workers in the vineyard and the prodigal son will always strike us as unfair. And that the Lord would not only countenance but command a shepherd to leave his 99 sheep to find the one lost one will forever puzzle and trouble us. As hard as it remains for us as Enlightenment-driven folk, sometimes we must simply accept what we cannot understand.

Finally, perhaps most importantly, I believe we must see in this Psalm, like much of scripture, not only as a declaration but also as an invitation, an invitation to enter into relationship with each other, and with God. In the last verse, as the commentators all point out, "follow" should really be translated "pursue." God's goodness and mercy pursue us. In all times and in all places, the Lord, our shepherd, seeks us out, even runs after us, always and forever inviting us to dwell in the house of the Lord.

The story is told of a bright Sunday morning many years ago in Washington, D.C. In a church not far from the White House, the worship service had just begun, when the doors opened, and a disheveled old man stepped in. Slowly and painfully, he hobbled down the center aisle, but not one soul would move aside to let him in. Finally, he reached the front, and turned to leave that "house of God," when from the first pew out stretched the long arm of Abraham Lincoln, with the words: "Come on in brother, there's lot of room here." Sisters, brothers, come on in. There's lots of room here.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil: for thou [my God] art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
 thou anointest my head with oil;
 my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy
 shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
 for ever.

Amen.

Hymn: "Abide with Me," UMH 700.

Benediction: Go in peace. Do what is right. Serve God. Amen.