

Psalm 23

This is our third week of the five week series on the Psalms. Today we will look at what is probably the most famous of them all – Psalm 23, popular at funerals, as well as on throw pillows, mugs, and plaques. This Psalm is known as the Pearl of Psalms, the Shepherd Psalm, and a Psalm of David, who was a shepherd before he was a king. “Of David” could mean it’s a Psalm David wrote; it could mean it’s a Psalm written in honour of David; or a Psalm written in his style.

It was written around 1000 BCE, making it about three thousand years old! David brought the ark of God’s covenant to a tent in Jerusalem. David wanted to build a house for the ark: But God did not allow him to build it because he was a warrior and had shed blood. So his son Solomon built the temple.

Jump forward 400 and some years. The kingdom has long been a battleground for larger and stronger neighbours – Assyria, Egypt, and now Babylon. The temple has been looted, desecrated, and restored numerous times over the centuries. In 597 BCE, Judah’s young king and 10,000 others, including the prophet Ezekiel, are deported to Babylon. Ezekiel foresees the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple but is not taken seriously until it actually happens in 586-587. His writings turn from scathing critique of Israel’s religious and political “shepherds” to images of rescue and restoration which appear to be in direct reference to Psalm 23. He writes:

“For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. I will bring them back home to their own land of Israel from among the peoples and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live. Yes, I will give them good pastureland on the high hills of Israel. There they will lie down in pleasant places and feed in the lush pastures of the hills. I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace ...

I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak... I will feed them, yes—feed them justice! ... In this way, they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them. And they will know that they, the people of Israel, are my people, says the Sovereign Lord. You are my flock, the sheep of my pasture. You are my people, and I am your God ...”

Jump forward another 600 years. Here is this Jesus of the house of David, identifying himself as the “Good Shepherd” in response to growing criticism from the religious and political leaders of his time. The link to Psalm 23 is clear. In John’s Gospel we read: *“I assure you, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! For a shepherd enters through the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate and the sheep hear his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them*

out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they recognize his voice.”

Skip ahead to our time and Psalm 23 is still going strong. The sheep/shepherd metaphor is really archaic. The prophetic connection from David to Jesus may be irrelevant. Nobody should make anybody lie down anywhere, and the only still water we're drinking is bottled. The “The dark valley of death” has profound spiritual implications for many. The psalms, and especially Psalm 23, speak powerfully to and for God's people in troubled times. And this Psalm is the essential text for the daily life of faith.

This Psalm is a psalm of “new orientation.” As described over the past two weeks, this type of psalm follows a time when God's people have experienced a crisis. They have been calling to God, yelling at God, looking for relief, asking God to save them – a time of lament. They have come through the crisis, and God has surprised them on the other side of their ordeal with new gifts and blessings and insights into God's faithfulness. These are Psalms about coming out of darkness into light, death emerging from life. This kind of prayer can only be prayed by someone who has come through a dark and lonely season of life, and realized that God had never left their side.

Psalms of “new orientation” include metaphorical descriptions of the crisis in which the psalmist is stuck. In Psalm 23, the crisis is described as “the dark valley of death.” In addition to metaphorical depictions of a situation of crisis, the psalms

of “new orientation” include language that expresses trust in God’s presence and deliverance. In today’s Psalm, the person in crisis confesses: *“the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need,” ... “He leads me beside peaceful streams, He renews my strength; He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to His name.”*

Trust – whether we are speaking of the ancient trust of the psalmist in Israel’s God, or the contemporary trust of a Christian today – trust is evoked by a promise. And the only possible responses to a promise are to believe it or not to believe it. To trust it or not to trust to it. To live as if the promise is real and trustworthy or to live as if the promise isn’t real or trustworthy.

The promise to the ancient psalmist was simple. “I am with you.” In response, the psalmist confesses, *“I will not be afraid for you are close beside me.” I may be surrounded by enemies, but “you prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.”* God is still with us. The God who drew near to us in Immanuel is still with us. In spite of our lack of trust and our failure to follow, Jesus has promised, *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

In the original Hebrew, there are fifty-five words in this psalm, creating a precise centre with twenty-six words before and after the phrase, “You are close beside me.” The poet was boldly declaring that God being with us is at the very centre of our lives.

Combine that insight with the closure created by the use of “Lord” in the psalm’s opening and closing phrases, and we see the portrait of the divine shepherd who is

there at the beginning, the middle, and the end of our journey.

The psalm declares that God enfolds his people so that we all are part of the flock; and yet this shepherd intimately knows the sheep in all their distinction and difference. Each one of us is, throughout his or her life, a unique and precious possession of God.

God is with us. We are not alone down here. The whole Gospel is that God is with us. Jesus was called "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." John Wesley's dying words were, "The best of all is, God is with us." God doesn't shelter us from trouble. God doesn't magically manipulate everything to suit us. But the glorious "with" is unassailable, unchangeable, the only fact that matters.

For the first three verses of the Psalm, God is spoken of in the third person: *"The Lord is my shepherd ... He leads me ... He renews my strength."* But with the change to "You," the poet shifts to second person: *"for You are close beside me, Your rod ... You prepare a feast ..."* Instead of talking *about* God, the Psalmist begins to talk *to* God; instead of God in the head, God is a friend in the heart. A conversation happens, a relationship grows. This is faith, the only true comfort.

If we genuinely, and in the marrow of our being, believe that God is with us, then the only logical consequence would be, *"I have everything I need."* We've read it, uttered it, delighted in it: but have we thought about it? Or lived it out in reality? I have everything I need. Yet, our whole life is about wanting: I want, I shop, I look, and when I have it, I want new stuff. In our consumer culture, I shall want, I shall

always want. I shall never stop all my wanting because the mall entices me with ever newer, shinier, unnecessary objects, and I am instructed, from childhood on, to want – and not merely to want, but to have.

Do I have everything I need? *"The Lord is my shepherd."* If the Lord is the shepherd, then I am a sheep, and the reason sheep need a shepherd is simple: a sheep is a particularly vulnerable creature, especially when on its own. Sheep need a leader so as not to wander aimlessly, and will follow their leader even into certain danger. Sheep have no defence against predators except for flocking, yet their instinctive flight response to danger can also cause panic and scattering. Individual sheep are highly stressed when separated from their flock. Sheep must be able to see each other in order to graze without agitation, and the loss of that visual contact can lead to further panic and flight. A lost sheep is a "sitting duck".

Sheep are not brilliant creatures, and we cannot be flattered that the Psalm thinks of us as sheep. Leave a sheep without a shepherd, and it nibbles itself lost. It nibbles a bit of grass here, wanders over there for some more, sees a patch just past that rock; and before you know it the sheep is lost, or has fallen into a ravine, or has been devoured by a wolf.

The depiction of the people of God as sheep arises from the experiences of vulnerable communities. The people are scattered and have fallen prey to those bent on Israel's destruction. These passages offer assurance that their Lord is with them, to lead them as their shepherd, to rescue the scattered and bring them to their own

land, and to gather lambs to God's bosom and gently lead them home.

The Hebrew original wording is better translated as, "I shall lack nothing," or "I shall lack no good thing," rather than "I have everything I need." So, what do I lack? Well, perhaps I lack the latest Smart Phone or tablet or a house on the lake. Maybe I lack a large pension fund or a new boat, or I lack _____. We can fill in the blank endlessly.

But it is more meaningful to ask "What do I lack?" in the sense of "**What really matters** – that I do not have?" What, at the hour of death, would I dare not lack? The answers aren't the latest electronic devices or vacation houses. Jesus spoke with the rich young ruler, who claimed to be good and had plenty of stuff. What did Jesus say? "One thing you still lack." Get rid of, give away all your stuff and follow me, and he could not do it.

We don't lack lots of things: we lack just one. The one thing we lack is intimacy with God. The one and only thing that can cause us to say, "I have everything I need," or "I lack no good thing," is God. Nothing else. Just the God who is a good shepherd to his sheep. God is our satisfaction. God is good enough. Or, to be truer, God exceeds whatever we may think we lack or desire in this life.

If "*You are close to me*" is the focal point of the Psalm, and if "*I have everything I need*" is the beginning of a new life of being satisfied with God, then the end of our life with God is this: "*I will live in the house of the Lord forever.*"

Why do we want stuff like the latest Smart phone or tablet? Why do we want bigger homes or vacation homes? Is it sheer coveting? Probably not. We want communication devices because we long to connect. We want a house, or a better house, because no matter how far we travel, no matter how happy or sad our nuclear family might have been, we carry inside a yearning for home. In our mobile society, we may be clueless about where that might be, or if it really exists. But we still want, above all else, to go home.

Perhaps T.S. Eliot was right: *"The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."* Or consider this: if you are lucky, you may have fond memories of summertime junkets to the home of your grandparents or favourite aunt or uncle. It was probably a house that is factually small, but as a child it was large in love, in special treats, in cousins and fun. It was another home, one without problems or homework or chores, a special place of a more unconditional kind of love.

Does God give us such places in our memory so that we will learn to desire the home for which God destines us when this life is over? Isaac Watts often recast Psalms into slightly different language. His metric version of the 23rd Psalm is eloquent, elegant, and moving. He writes:

"The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days;

O may Your House be my abode, and all my work be praise. There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come; no more a stranger or a guest,

but like a child at home."

Like a child at home ... Yes, some children bear the misfortune of a home that is more warfare than peace, more division than love. But the fact that we recoil at the idea of any child anywhere not enjoying peace and love at home is evidence that God has wired into our hearts a keen sense of a proper destiny, which looks like us as a child at our grandmother's table or in our grandfather's lap.

Various happenings in our life strike us as urgent. They make us anxious, or perhaps we have fun times, or maybe face difficult trials. But it is all a preparation for a grand homecoming, when we will *"find a settled rest ... no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home."* Or as the Psalmist sang, *"And I will live in the house of the Lord forever."*

In order to grasp the psalm's meaning in its original context, it is important to know that both Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures used the shepherd image for their kings, their gods, or both. The epilogue to the famous Code of Hammurabi has the king state: *"I made the people lie down in safe pastures, I did not allow everyone to frighten them."* Or in regard to the image of the banquet, there is the goddess Anat who *"arranges seats for the warriors, arranges tables for the soldiers."* The biblical psalmist, being well aware of this broad cultural background, is making an affirmation of faith: the Lord - not a foreign god or goddess or king - is the only true shepherd of each and every Israelite. We now hear this psalm not merely as a message of comfort on life's journey but a theological creed spoken in the midst of

our own culture with all its earthly leaders and so-called “gods” that can never be the Shepherd-King of our Psalm.

It’s easy to connect this poem with the shepherd images elsewhere in the Bible, but not so easy to identify the echoes of Israel’s national journey of deliverance, wilderness, and emergence in the land. This most precious of personal psalms is about both our individual journeys and the journey of the people of God.

Today’s Psalm is spoken by one who knows fresh pain. The writer speaks for a community - that has recently walked through the darkest valley, and has emerged, trembling and stumbling and blinking in the light. The writer of this Psalm delightedly proclaims, again and again - **trust in the Lord.**

Assurance of God’s presence and care does not erase evil and suffering. Nowhere in the Psalms do we find a naïve trust, but always one that is fully aware of what has been lost. Divine deliverance does not mean that evil is eradicated. It is still in the presence of enemies that the psalmist sits down at God’s table. There is no suggestion here that enemies have become friends.

But this Psalm insists that we can trust in deliverance in the midst of evil; the deliverance is true – it’s real. Whatever preys upon us, individually and as communities, we are not defeated because God is with us. Imagine if we lived as if we really knew this truth, as if we really feared no evil – because our trust is in God. Imagine where no longer being driven by our fear might take us. Imagine if we, the vulnerable flock of the divine, knew ourselves forever to be pursued by the goodness

and mercy of God. *“Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.”*

Amen.