

“The Shepherd of Contentment”

Psalm 23 and John 10: 11, 14-15
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¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake.

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. (Psalm 23, KJV)

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows;

you find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through Death Valley,

I'm not afraid when you walk by my side.

Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies.

You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.

I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

(Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Psalm 23, in *The Message*)

John 10:11 *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”* . . . 14-15 *“I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”*

My life this past week seemed as though I was holding a driver's wheel that had come out of the steering column. And the gas pedal was stuck to the floor! No controls, or so it seemed. Ever had one of those weeks yourself? At first, I wondered if I would be able to find inspiration for this week's

sermon. But with the 23rd Psalm, you can't go wrong, can you? I thought it would be easy to deal with a psalm almost everyone knows and loves. But looking up what some theologians say about the 23rd Psalm, I cam up against the words of Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggeman (a favorite mentor whom I've often heard at conferences). Brueggemann began his reflections on the 23rd Psalm saying, "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" (*The Message of the Psalms*, Augsburg, 1984, 154).

"Without comment?" So then, I felt a bit "sheepish" about commenting on the 23rd Psalm (yes, a pun)! My reflections may sound "pretentious" as a mere preacher. And I fear having someone give me the backhanded compliment a Scottish woman said to her preacher: "I love to hear you preach. You get so many things out of the text that aren't really there." (Watchman, *Appreciation of the Pastor Book*, 1996, 47).

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," so well-known, hearkens back to pastures and calm waters and rural images of peace and confidence in God. The shepherd images are also found in today's Gospel passage from John, in which Jesus identifies himself by saying, "I am the Good Shepherd." Both passages tell us of God's care and love for us. Christ as the Good Shepherd is protective, compassionate, and giving to the point of death for the sake of the sheep.

The psalmist has this firm confidence in God. "The Lord is my Shepherd (a positive statement), I shall not want," or "I shall lack nothing." The negative conveys a strong sense of "contentment." God is the satisfaction of all our wants and needs, both spiritually and physically. It never means God fulfills just a religious yearning, but God deals with all our needs. The images of cup, table, and oil guard against spiritualizing, for they concern food and drink, and oil, real things.

The powerful metaphor that runs through the whole psalm depicts God's caring relationship with us, who are like sheep. Yet I have a hard time with this metaphor, and perhaps you do, as well. I have a hard time comparing us to sheep. Maybe shepherds abound in the hills of Palestine, but not here. Nor do we hold sheep in very high regard. They are rather dumb animals and we resist being compared to animals that eat grass on

hillsides, animals who appeared in the children's movie BABE whom even a pig can order around! Most of us do not relish this comparison.

Another preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, also struggles with this image. But then she was enlightened by a rancher. That rancher explained that while you DROVE cattle from behind, sheep resist that and insist on being LED. In fact, they will get behind a force that seeks to drive them from the back.

² he leadeth me beside the still waters. ³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake.

Now I admit that I can see a parallel in us, in that we are usually comfortable being led, too. We may follow a vision or a goal which draws us on—perhaps a vision to succeed in a marriage, or in a job, or in parenting, or in having a circle of close friends. We do not like being driven from behind, as when we feel driven by the pressures of time, or by a boss or by a spouse—or even a parent, right?! We do not like to be driven. Yet most of us feel comfortable having a goal out there in front of us, or a trusted leader, drawing us on. So we are somewhat like sheep in following a vision and in wanting to follow a cause greater than ourselves as we follow the Good Shepherd.

The rancher Phillip Keller, in his book about Psalm 23 which the Open Door class read last year (*A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Zondervan, 2007), also explains that sheep bond very closely with their shepherd. They know their shepherd not just by sight, but by the footsteps and voice. When sheep are sleeping in a fold at night, for instance, there is virtual pandemonium in a section if a stranger walks nearby one of them. Yet their own shepherd can walk right through the gathered flock of sheep and they will remain quiet, sleeping soundly, accepting that shepherd with utter trust.

A people who are like sheep have quite a lot to live up to! Do you see it? First, we are to follow the shepherd who loves us and lays down his life for us. Second, to recognize the voice and to absolutely trust in God's goodness and protection is to be like trusting sheep are towards a shepherd! To be a sheep here means to have an intimate relationship with God, sensing God's presence and knowing God's voice in our lives. Can you say that you have that kind of relationship with God?

The psalm does not deny that there are valleys and enemies and crosses to bear in this life. But they are not capable of destroying us. And so the powerful presence of God comforts us, precisely in situations of threat and death. That's also why this psalm is a beloved prayer-poem read at funerals and before death.

The Elephant Man (1980; dir. David Lynch), which was nominated for eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, is based on the true story of Joseph Merrick (called John Merrick in the movie), a nineteenth-century Briton who was terrifyingly disfigured. Dr. Frederick Treves (Anthony Hopkins), a compassionate physician, rescues Merrick (played magnificently by John Hurt) from being a sideshow attraction.



Treves keeps Merrick as a resident at the hospital where Treves works. At first, the doctor thinks that Merrick is probably severely mentally challenged but then realizes that the patient is actually intelligent and sensitive. Treves teaches Merrick some words to say to another physician (John Gielgud) as a way of showcasing Merrick's ability. After leaving Merrick and going to another

room, the physician expresses to Treves that he is unimpressed, because he believes that Merrick is simply parroting what Treves has trained him to say. Then the two men hear coming from Merrick's room the recitation of the 23rd Psalm, which is extraordinary because Treves has not taught Merrick that passage. This recitation of Scripture, then, becomes a turning point in the film by revealing to both physicians that this hideous man is even more intelligent than they had supposed.

Merrick is one of the oppressed and afflicted, and he utters words far greater than what others had expected. *The Elephant Man* is in part a film about the lifting up of the lowly, just as is Jesus' story.

(from Beth Lyon, Glenside United Church of Christ,
Luke 4:14-21, Lectionary Homiletics online, 2010)

In our recitation of the 23rd Psalm, we share our humanity and humility and vulnerability together. Unless it's a sudden death, we will all face the valley

of the shadow of death, some of us many times, and one of the times we will really die. Dying is, we know, part of living, a mystery we all face. (When we consider research, we had to admit that the real experts on it are not communicating with us any longer! Someone said, “We’re all dying to know what’s on the other side!”)

Although we shall each have to face our own valley of death in this life, we are not condemned to death. While there is sin, we have been rescued from the ultimate evil, rescued by the shepherd from death and led into new life. We are shepherded by the One who has laid down his life for us. In John’s gospel, Jesus is telling his followers that he will lay down his life and then he will take it up again. He did this on the cross; and then he rose, leaving the tomb empty, and appearing as a resurrected Christ, one who has power of everlasting life for us!

I don’t know what lies beyond, but I believe that Christ, who is sufficient for my needs here, will be that same Christ who meets me there. We will not die, but we will face the dawn – the true dawn—in that Easter faith of resurrection. The Valley of the Shadow of Death is not to be feared. The tomb is empty. The cross and death is NOT the end.

Take heart! The Savior, the Good Shepherd, calls us to follow. As we trust in him and follow him (yes, like sheep), we do come to know and experience the love of God and the resurrection of all we bear, through Jesus Christ. There is a wise saying that “I am happy when I get what I want; I am content when I realize that I already have everything I need.” So we can be deeply content when we realize that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who supplies all our needs, IS Himself, first and foremost, all we really need.

Pray with me:

*Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
By paths as yet untrodden,
Through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with courage,
Not knowing where we go,
But only that your hand is leading us
And your love supporting us;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*