

Psalm 23

The Good Shepherd

I did not grow up on a farm, with crops and animals all around. Most people live in towns, suburbs, and cities. The Bible teems with agricultural images and themes because the people of Israel, and to a large degree people of all times and places until post WWII America all *did* live in farm communities and understood the references very well. The title of my vocation, “pastor,” comes from this illustration, quite literally, of taking care of the sheep. A pastor is a shepherd. A congregation is a flock.

Perhaps there are other illustrations that would better suit our experience:

A pastor is a coach, the congregation is a team

A pastor is an executive, the congregation is a business

A pastor is a guide, a congregation a group of people on a journey

or even, the pastor is a king, or president, and the congregation is a country

But the Bible is happy with shepherding as an illustration. This past Sunday in our Lenten Bible study we looked at the shepherding images in the Gospel of John, “I am’ the gate for the sheep, ‘I am’ the Good Shepherd.” We discovered this theme throughout the

Old and the New Testaments. Abraham was a shepherd, and so were Isaac and Jacob. And Jacob’s 12 sons were all shepherds, as well as the great King David. Jesus is presented not only as the ideal shepherd, but also as the Lamb of God who sacrificed himself for the sheep.

Maybe the most well-known occurrence is in the 23rd Psalm, our text for today, which gives the strongest sense of God as the great shepherd who cares for and guides us through life’s journey.

The Green Pastures and Quiet Waters

It has been said (I remember an episode of “The Cosmos” with Neil Degrasse Theissen) that across cultures the most desired residence is a pastoral scene. People say they feel the deepest peace and most long to be able to live along the banks of a quiet running stream with a grassy slope surrounded by a wooded area.

Researchers suggest that perhaps these images are placed in the human consciousness because they represent the scenes where ancient people sought to live; with proximity to safety, water, and land. Very often, as people become affluent, they exchange urban or suburban living for the country.

So the psalm presents us with an almost primal image, and uses these pastoral scenes to offer a philosophy to live by. The Lord gives life, and it is good. It is characterized by the restorative effects of the color green, quiet, running water, cool, but not cold.

One may not share the excitement about such scenes, perhaps an aquamarine Caribbean beach or the heights of a mountain vista, but can still get the point. Life is a precious gift that overflows the cup and fills the soul with not only goodness but righteousness and beauty. The Lord is my Shepherd.

The Valley of the Shadow

But the philosophy expressed in the song is not naive, out-of-touch with reality. It acknowledges the dangers and risks involved in being alive, and the proximity of death. The “valley of the shadow” is such a well-articulated expression that it has survived all these millennia to become a part of the popular mind.

It not only refers to the proximity of death but because it is a valley, represents the low periods of life, the down-times when there is less safety, less comfort, less peace. It represents the ways we are always vulnerable. And like the green pastures and still waters, the valley is a part of the milieu of life. The song acknowledges it as a given.

Life comes with difficulties that must be faced. There can be no health if they are denied or if there are attempts to escape them. Illness, financial and relational stress, just the stress of daily life and work, and the larger issues of war and poverty and social distress; they can not be avoided.

Along the way mistakes are made stemming largely from our tendency to excessive selfishness, and the results of these mistakes only add to the difficulties. And we all face the common end. Death is a shadow that follows us everywhere. Life is good, but it is risky. The Lord is My Shepherd.

The Table

When we are young and unaware of life’s painful side, haven’t figured out that life isn’t always fair, we are set up for great disappointment. If we persist in this trivial approach to life, the sense of disappointment can be overwhelming. It leads to bad spiritual health. Only with an acknowledgment like the one in this song can we peer into both the wonderful and the dangerous sides of life and ask for truth. What will we find?

The picture given to us is of a feast, a table prepared, right there in the middle of the valley with enemies everywhere. There can be no evil in the Lord’s

presence. Instead there is anointing. The cup runs over. Even the Lord's discipline is a comfort.

The song peels back the layers of life and sees both the good and the evil, the light and the darkness, the beautiful and the horrific. When all of it is taken into account, the conclusion is that life is a beautiful gift. It is way better to have lived this risky life and struggled with its difficulties than to have never lived at all. The Lord is My Shepherd.

The House of the Lord

The great affirmation is made; that in spite of experiences to the contrary, goodness and mercy are a part of the air we breathe and follow us around like the shadow, pursuing us all the days of our lives.

And there is more. The concept of afterlife is a part of the growing understanding in Israel's life after the Babylonian Exile 2,500 years ago, and it continues through the life of Jesus to the present. The Resurrection of the Dead, a doctrine the Pharisees and Sadducees argued about, promises eternal life.

"Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life," the song concludes, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever."

The concept of the Lord's house is comforting because there is no danger there, there is no risk there, instead only fulfillment. We are kept safe forever. The Lord is Our Shepherd.

It is all there; an affirmation of life's wonder and grandeur and beauty, an acknowledgement of life's danger and risk, of sin and God's restorative discipline and guidance and care. It is all there, a vision of the abundant life and the hope of eternity, all in six short verses of poetry.

We read it at funerals but it is always in our hearts. One can live a lifetime on this philosophy. Believe in it, it is the whole gospel message in ancient agricultural garb. And in that faith:

Grow up to salvation
Be generous and kind
Be compassionate and forgiving
Be courageous and good
Have some joy

The Lord is Your Shepherd.

Amen.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)