

4th Sunday of Easter – 07 May 2017The 23rd Psalm

Every year within the Easter season there is a pattern that we follow, not because we want to be predictable, but rather because in pattern comes learning and peace. When we know something well, it can become a source of comfort and strength. And so, within the Church we create a rhythm of learning that rises up out of a predictable routine. Easter Sunday is followed by Doubting Thomas Sunday, which is followed by the Road to Emmaus Sunday, which is followed by the Good Shepherd Sunday. That is where we are today.

This routine and predictability used to lead to a world in which almost everyone, churchgoer or not, would be able to recite such things as The Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. When I was first ordained there was never a need to print either the prayer or the Psalm in a bulletin because everyone just knew it. However, times have changed. The Lord's Prayer is no longer recited daily in schools. The 23rd Psalm is familiar but not as easily recited as once it was. And that is a shame.

I think part of the problem with the Psalm is that the imagery doesn't speak to our world the way it did in Jesus' day or even not so long ago when our society was still living in an agrarian model. When family farms were common, the idea of a shepherd was more easily recognizable. These days, however, there doesn't seem, yet, to have arisen an equivalent that the Church could hold up as an example that young people of today would be able to connect with.

And so, since we don't have a new analogy to replace the concept of the Good Shepherd, then we need to do the work of understanding the Psalm itself so that we can *reclaim* and then *proclaim* the power and truth that exist within this small poem.

Let's take a close look at the Psalm itself, as can be found in the NRSV version.

The Lord is my shepherd. What is a shepherd? One whose sole responsibility it is to take care of every sheep in his flock. He doesn't give them their food, but he leads them to it. He doesn't dictate every step they take, but he does guide them and try to keep them where they will be safe and sound. He sometimes steps in front of them to protect them from perils that lie ahead and those who would prey on them. Quite often a shepherd will follow behind the group or skirt around the sides to encourage all to stay together and to discourage any stragglers from being lost. And, when one does disappear or get into trouble, the shepherd will go to all lengths necessary to rescue that one wayward sheep. ... *The Lord is our shepherd.*

I shall not want. The word "want" has become such a part of our society that it, like the image of the shepherd, has become something completely misunderstood within the context of this Psalm. To want, in this poem, is not simply to desire something but rather to truthfully *have need*. When the psalmist says "I shall not want" he is indicating his belief that in God he has, or will be provided with, all that he needs. Keep in mind that a need is very different than a desire. ... *I shall not want.*

He makes me lie down in green pastures. Any good shepherd knows his sheep. He knows how much more they can travel and he knows when they need rest. Like a parent of a young child who imposes a bedtime for the good of that child, the shepherd knows when to call his sheep to

rest. The shepherd stops the sheep from moving restlessly back and forth, wandering and getting distracted, and he makes them lie down and take rest, when they need it, in a place that is safe and secure for them. He does not lead them into a wilderness for their rest but rather into a place in which they can rest assured that they are safe, they have what they need and where they can see him always. ... *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

He leads me beside still waters. The shepherd knows what his sheep can and cannot do. He is not going to lead them into whirlpools and deep waters that will cause them harm or make them panic. Rather, he knows that they need water for sustenance and they need to be able to approach it to drink with a stillness of mind and body that will allow them to receive those filling waters that nourish and sustain them. ... *He leads me beside still waters.*

He restores my soul. Imagine that you are a lamb that has gotten separated from the flock and you are lost, alone, afraid. Imagine what you would feel when you hear the shepherd's voice calling out for you, getting closer and closer to you as he searches for you and finds you. Your very soul would be relieved, restored. Where once was fear and worry would now be peace and rest. When the shepherd comes to find us, we find that we are restored to peace and gentleness of heart. ... *He restores my soul.*

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. This may be a bit more difficult to struggle with. The very presence of the shepherd is not all about us ... Yes, his role, his job, is to keep us, his sheep, safe, to bring us home to his master in good shape, all accounted for. However, the shepherd himself was not created simply to be only a shepherd for our sake. We are important to him but not the sole reason for his existence. Quite to the contrary, we exist for him. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't be here. Not the other way around. We are called and expected to follow the right path, and that will always be of benefit to us, but it isn't really all about us. It is really all about him. We walk the right path because we desire, and we need, to follow the shepherd. Our very being is dependent on him and it is for his sake that we do develop that desire, in addition to the want, or need, we have to follow him. What started out as necessity in following the shepherd becomes a choice and an effort we desire to make. ... *He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil. As we live our lives as sheep in the fold of Jesus our shepherd, there are no guarantees that we won't come across deeply challenging and difficult times. As a matter of fact, we may find that it is because of our faith in Christ that we find ourselves in some pretty dark valleys. But even if it is not our faith that leads us into those dark periods in life, we will all find that life's moments are not all charmed. The loss of a job or a friend, a health crisis or a death of a loved one, all of these can lead us straight down into that valley but we are reminded that we will not fear any evil.

Darkness in itself is not scary. It is what we fear might happen in the dark that is scary. Evil is all around us, we know that. But we also know, as we have just learned, that the shepherd is near us, protecting us, guiding us, even when we are in that darkest and deepest valley. Will that darkness be easy to navigate? No. But there is no need for us to fear as we navigate. Jesus is beside us. ... *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. The first part of this phrase makes sense. The shepherd, Jesus, is with us. That we can understand. However, “your rod and your staff, they comfort me” doesn’t make as easy sense. The rod and the staff were used to push obstacles out of the way and to beat back predators. But they were also used to prod an errant sheep into order again or to hook a sheep by the neck or legs to save it from falling or getting caught up in something. The staff was a stick with a circular but open end on it – like a cane. The shepherd could hold the staff at the straight end and reach out the rounded open end to hook the sheep and pull it back to safety in the flock. Being prodded or hooked by that staff would not have been a pleasant experience. It would have hurt, but in that kind of hurt came as well the comfort of knowing that you had been saved. ... *For you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.*

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. The shepherd did not herd his flock home to their pen every night. Quite the opposite, the shepherd would rest in the fields, on the hills, in the valleys, with the sheep each night – right there in the wilderness, surrounded by the predators that were lying in wait. The shepherd does not whisk us away and build a wall around us to save us, but he stays with us and guards us as we live our lives right in the midst of all that could hurt us, but from which he protects us. He expects us to sit at the table, to move about and do our business, right out in the open, knowing and trusting that the shepherd is with us and guarding us. ... *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. At this point we recognize that the psalmist has moved from the imagery of Jesus as shepherd to Jesus as the Lord. Only the Lord can anoint another with oil. This shift in focus is important because our understanding of our relationship to Jesus changes right here. No longer are we mere sheep being tended, provided for and saved. Now we have been chosen and welcomed as part of the royal family. Kings were anointed with oil. Our cup overflowing speaks of the abundance of all of Jesus’ gifts that he is now sharing with us, not as sheep and followers, but as members of the royal family, brothers and sisters of Christ himself. Not only are we saved and protected. Now we are also welcomed and provided for in ways that go well beyond anything we could ever have imagine. ... *You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

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. Look what has happened to us – we are no longer sheep, wandering the hillside, being watched over by our shepherd. We have been welcomed into the shepherd’s very house and granted the gifts of goodness and mercy, simply by *his* goodness and mercy. We have been received, welcomed and accepted where we could not have gone on our own, but where we are nonetheless completely and utterly welcomed for ever. ... *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.*

As we continue in our worship and as you head back out into the world, I invite you to reclaim and proclaim the great and deep truth that this beloved Psalm shares with us. It goes deeper and delves further into our souls and our faith lives than we usually are aware.

I invite you to turn in your bulletin (to the 8:30 am service) and recite with me the words of this beautiful love song that God is singing to us in His son Jesus Christ. ...