

# Sermon, 4 Easter A

Psalm 23

Preached Sunday, April 13, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

After the Lord's Prayer, it is probably the best-known and best-loved passage in the entire Bible. We recite it at burials, funerals, in hospital rooms and beside sick beds. All I have to do is speak the words, "The Lord is my shepherd," and in response I usually hear a chorus of, "I shall not want."

The words of the 23rd Psalm are both comforting and comfortable. They're a touchstone for millions of people at key moments in their lives. But how often do we think about their meaning? This beloved passage, as beautiful as it is, can become something we say to make ourselves feel better — without realizing that it is also a profound statement of faith.

I began to appreciate the significance of this great psalm once I learned some things about sheep and shepherding. Take the phrase, "He makes me lie down in green pastures." Like me, you might skip over the first half of that verse and focus on the second — enjoying visions of lush, green pastures filled with contented sheep. Until recently, however, I didn't know that sheep are not often found in this position.

According to a man who once worked as a shepherd, sheep are unlikely to lie down unless four requirements are met: First, due to their timidity, they must be free from fear. Next, they must be free from flies or other bothersome insects so that they can relax enough to remain lying down. Third, they will not lie down unless they are adequately fed. Finally, because of their sociable nature, they must be free from suspicion of other members of the flock. Only the shepherd — a good shepherd — can fulfill these requirements and convince the sheep that they can, indeed, lie down and rest.+

Here are some other things which might help us understand the 23rd Psalm in a more profound way:

- Green pastures are important for the sheep, who eat all available ground cover down to the root. A large flock of sheep need to be moved often to have enough to eat.
- Guidance from a shepherd is very important for sheep because they tend to flee at the first sign of danger. They have poor eyesight and can get lost easily if they wander away from the flock. Alone and without protection, they are easy prey for predators.
- Leading the sheep beside "still waters" means searching for water that was not flowing too swiftly. Even when thirsty, most sheep will not drink from a body of water unless it is calm and still.
- In the context of shepherding, the phrase "set a table" has a specific meaning. Shepherds in the Middle East used the term to refer to preparing a pasture for the sheep to graze. This included uprooting poisonous weeds and clearing the area of the sheep's natural enemies, such as snakes and scorpions.
- In the evening, shepherds often tend the sick sheep by anointing their wounds with oil and giving them a nutritious drink sweetened with honey.

With these things in mind, you can see how the relationship between the sheep & the shepherd is so important for the well-being of the flock. The sheep are utterly dependent on the competence and compassion of the shepherd, who must supply their needs if they are to survive.

With the 23rd Psalm, there is no need to explain the analogy of shepherd and sheep, God and us. We know instinctively that we are creatures in need of leadership. The same instinct tells us that God and Jesus are our spiritual shepherds. Our egos may not like it, but our souls know that we really do need someone to guide us and protect us from the slings and arrows of life.

Do we also recognize, however, that there are many who want to be our shepherds? When this psalm was written, the word “shepherd” also referred to people who had power and authority to rule and govern. In this year of unprecedented campaigning and politicking, here is a voice which declares that we will allow no one but Yahweh and God’s Anointed to guide us.

Walter Brueggemann, a great scholar of the Old Testament, says that we should not overlook the political and economic implications of what we profess in this text. When we say that the Lord is our shepherd and therefore we shall not want, we are boldly declaring that we trust in God — and only God — to supply our needs. Brueggemann writes,

This is a statement of enormous confidence in the generosity of God, the One who knows what we need and gives well beyond all that we ask or think. But notice at the same time this phrase, “I shall not want” is a decision made against the greed and lust and ... aggressive ambition of a consumer society. Our consumer society is driven by the notion that we always must want one more thing, and we are entitled to it, and we will have it no matter what.... Faith in this God requires a refocus[ing] of all our desires, because most of our wants are contrived and imagined and phony. This Lord will be Lord of our wants and needs — and we need much less when we are clear about the ... goodness of God.”\*

Another implication of the 23rd Psalm is that, no matter what our political affiliation, we are not expecting the next president of the United States — or senator, or governor of North Carolina — to become the new guardian of our souls. This is as true in the political realm as it is in every other: no family member; no spouse; no friend; no doctor; no psychotherapist; no spiritual director; no priest, bishop or deacon, can ever take the place of God our Creator or Christ — the only Shepherd who is worthy to be called Good.

One reason this psalm is so beloved is because it does not shy away from the dangers of life. It recognizes that there are real needs which may not always be met, that evil and enemies are a reality, and that we do pass through dark valleys filled with the shadow of death. Last week, we were studying this passage at a meeting of our Pastoral Care Team. During our reflection, a member of the group said, “In this life, to one degree or another, I think we’re always walking through the valley of the shadow of death.” The conviction of this psalm is not that God will magically pluck us out of these shadow-filled valleys, but that the Good Shepherd will not abandon us in the midst of them.

In one of our prayer groups at St. Philip’s, we’ve been learning about two of the great Christian mystics, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. They both were pioneers in helping believers befriend some of the greatest mysteries of our faith. One of their most helpful teachings concerns the ways of God when we experience a spiritual crisis. When we walk through the dark valleys, John and Teresa contend that God is at work to bring about the transformation of our souls. But the power of God’s love is hidden from us because of the darkness and loss we feel.

A contemporary writer says that after someone goes through a “Dark Night of the Soul,” the soul looks back on the experience and realizes:

“God was present all the time and I did not recognize Him. I thought it was darkness, but it was light. I thought it was nothing, but it was all.” ... As excessive light of the sun blinds the human eye, so the excessive light of God plunges [us] into thick darkness. And God is approached in darkness and emptiness and nothingness simply because [God] is the mystery of [all] mysteries.\*\*

Our shepherd is the Good Shepherd — even when it feels as if our souls are surrounded by darkness. Years ago, a great leader of the Anglican tradition wrote a poem about faith. This morning, we might imagine that these words come from the heart of a trusting and faithful sheep:

Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,

Lead Thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home;

Lead Thou me on!

Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see

The distant scene — one step enough for me.\*\*\*

Surely, his goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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FOOTNOTES:

+Phillip Keller, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

\*The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power and Weakness (ed. Charles L. Campbell, Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 91-92. Emphasis added.

\*\*William Johnston, The Inner Eye of Love: Mysticism and Religion, 1978, pp. 121-122.

\*\*\*John Henry Newman, “The Pillar of the Cloud” in Verses On Various Occasions (London: Longmans, Greens & Co.: 1903).