

“The Lord Is My Shepherd”

Psalm 23

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Congratulations Graduates! A lot of people are soon going to ask you: What are you going to do after graduation? You don't have to sweat what you say. Five minutes later, most of them will forget what you tell them. There is a reason. They don't care much about what you are going to do. (Note: I did not say they do not care about you!)

They don't care about what you are going to do, because what they really care about is who you are going to be. What kind of person are you going to be? What kind of values are you going to live out? If you live out of the wrong values: they will want to know so they will avoid you like the plague. If you live out of the right values: they will have hope for the future. With the right values, you will touch their lives, and the lives of others. They will remember you for a long time. Some of them, will remember you their whole lives.

That is my introduction to the Bible passage this morning. Some parts of the Bible are far more focused on being than doing. That is what I'd like you to consider regarding Psalm 23. It is one of the songs of the Bible.

There are songs all over the Bible. Tucked into a great many of the books: Genesis, Exodus, Samuel, Matthew, Corinthians, Revelation. The book of Revelation is full of songs, and it is important to know when you are taking on the Beast, it drives him crazy to hear those Christians singing.

All over the Bible are songs. We read them like prose, but they are poems meant to be sung. One of the wonderful dimensions of the Bible is that they made sure they included their greatest hits. 150 of them in one book alone: the book of Psalms. From its earliest form, the faithful gathered together to sing these songs.

Researchers today say, it is a good thing to memorize poems and stories while you are young: it helps you when you are old. It goes into long term memory. It helps you remember who you are. Israel memorized these song to help them, when they became forgetful to remember who they truly are.

One Bible scholar a hundred years ago, put forth a thesis about how the early tribes of Israel used the songs of the Psalms. It was a polytheistic culture: lots of gods. Every year Israel would have a festival of worship in which their God, Yahweh, would ritually battle the other gods. Yahweh would win.

So the other gods would ritually agree to serve Yahweh for another year. In this ritual festival, the person who would play the part of Yahweh would be the King. In it Yahweh, the King, would give something of a State of the Union speech: in which he stated a vision for the coming future: a vision for health, healing, hope, peace, shalom.

It was part of what would legitimate the King for the coming year. It was a vision: beyond business as usual, a projection of hope. This powerful experience of worship opened up the imagination of the people for the future to begin now. It opens the future in the present. The future begins now.

Why worship? It permits hope. Worship embraces alternative future. When in worship there are words and songs that critique the false gods of world around us, worship liberates us to imagine an alternate reality. A new creation.

In worship, we say thank you to God. But, we do much, much more. We open our imaginations to embrace God's reign. In worship, we work with God to construct a new social reality. A reality of a world based on God's love, forgiveness, grace, compassion. Worship is working with God to generate a new future. An alternate reality.

When we sing our songs of praise, we participate in constructing, both in our personal and in our social imagination, an alternate reality: we build an awareness, a sensitivity to seeing what God is doing; an openness to the possibilities a present and future where people can live in authentic hope.

Simply put, worship makes a new world. We sing our way into it.

Of course, there is the reality of sin in the world. When we leave worship, we go out into the world and there are all these other voices seeking to tear down God's vision. We live among the false gods of corrupting, destructive values.

False gods of self-centeredness, greed, ethnic hatred, tribalism, aggression, war. We know that is how the world is. It has an influence on us: we start to think in those terms.

The human essence is changeable. Every word, every act has an influence on us. Word by word, it can make you a little more degraded. Or word by word, it can elevate you. That is why we keep coming back to worship. To keep building up that alternative reality of Yahweh. The God of hope. The God of love.

In worship we are reminded that the power of God is a relentless passion to create life. To bless us. Worship makes it possible for us to be sensitive to the love of God, to see that love in the world, and the strength to participate in this reality based not on what we have done, but on who we are, based on the reality of God's presence.

23rd Psalm is a wonderful example.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

The Hebrew says it more forcefully:

Yahweh is my shepherd. I want NOT.

This shepherd *makes me lie down in green pastures:*

In the presence of God, I am at rest.

Leads me beside still waters:

water is an image of transcendence.

In the guidance of God, I experience a transcendent peace.

He restoreth my soul:

because that is what the wrong job does,

that is what the wrong relationship does,

that is what the wrong public values do:

they eat away at your soul.

You end up not liking who you are.

Yahweh, the Good shepherd, takes you in these transcendent paths that heals your soul. God helps you to heal and be who you truly are as a beloved child of God. The Lord leads me beside the transcendent waters and heals me, why? Not because God want something from us. God does *it for his name's sake*: because that is who God is. That is God's being.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. This song is not pie in the sky. It does not pretend that bad things do not happen. The song knows of evil, enemies, threats of every kind. The song acknowledges death. But just when we confront the reality of evil, the words change: The song starts out: in the 3rd person, distant: *He leads me*. When evil shows up, it changes to the first person: *Thou art with me*. These are the words of direct address. It witnesses to the realization when in the darkest valley, when the greatest threat is before us, the presence of God is there to comfort and protect us. Thou, God, You are with me.

The presence of God changes us. Like sheep that don't really understand what a shepherd is, but run to him or her in times of danger. The well-spring of life is with us. It surrounds us.

In the presence of my enemies, *my cup overflows*. *You set a table in front of me, in the presence of my enemies*: In the presence of my enemies, I'm having dinner. Either that means God gives me tremendous courage and fortitude, or God's love has the capacity to transform enemies into friends. And we dine together.

It is an image of life lived in complete trust. Surrounded by God's care. The awareness of God's presence, love and care, transforms every situation. It changes our world.

The 23 Psalm starts out saying: "The Lord is my shepherd." In the Hebrew tradition: the name of God is never spoken. It is too holy. So where the Bible translates, "The Lord," it is often God's name, Yahweh. What the Hebrew text actually says is, *Yahweh is my shepherd*. Yahweh is named twice in this Psalm. Once at the beginning and again at the very end. *I will dwell in the house of Yahweh. Forever.*

It is a poetic way of saying: We live our lives surrounded by the all-encompassing, never-ending love of God. God gives us a sense of peace. That is the alternate world in which we live, as we sing our way into it.

A long time ago, in a church far, far away, there was a woman. I'll call her Pearl. She was one of the mothers of the church. She was not the most vivacious person to be around. Nor the most charismatic woman. Pearl was solid. She took care of business. She took care of the church. In difficult times, she was a quiet, intelligent voice of calm and reason. She was one of those people others knew they could count on. It was good to know Pearl was there. She was trustworthy.

Then one day we heard she had been hospitalized. It was serious. A stroke. Deacon Ellen and I went to go see Pearl. We arrived, and saw that this intelligent, articulate, wise woman could not find the words to put even one sentence together.

Pearl was very uncomfortable: she wanted to speak. She could not. Ellen and I tried talking to her. Our talking did not calm her agitation. Ellen and I were so shocked, so sad. Where did she go? Where did this wonderful woman go?

The two of us ran out of words. We held hands with Pearl, and not knowing what else to say: One of us simply started the Psalm: *The Lord is my shepherd...*

And at that exact moment, Pearl calmed down. And she began to speak right along with us, word for word, every word:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Where did Pearl go? I like to think she was living in those green pastures, beside those still waters, finding peace in the very presence of the God who watches over us and who loves us all.

In fact, we are in that very presence right now. It is the reality we live in every day. The Shepherd who watches over us, now and always. Be at peace. Amen.

Sources

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