**Psalm 23**

*The Divine Shepherd*

A Psalm of David

1The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

3he restores my soul. He leads me in the right paths for his name’s sake.

4Even through I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

5You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

6Surely, 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.

**Notes**

1. When do we usually hear this psalm read?
2. In this psalm, God is portrayed with two metaphors (vs 1; v 5): shepherd (v. 1) and host (v. 5).

Metaphor: “a figure of speech in which a word or a phrase is applied to an object to which it is not literally applicable; a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else.”

1. Why were metaphors important to the Jews?
2. Why is the word “LORD” in capital letters?

(YHWH, Adonai) became YaHoWaH = Jehovah (when Masoretic Jews added vowels to consonants in the 6th century A.D.)

1. In this psalm, where is God in relation to David (us) (v. 2; v. 4, v. 5, v. 6)?
2. V. 4 “darkest valley vs. “valley of the shadow of death.” Represents the times in our live of deepest despair, greatest fear
3. V. 5, the character of the host. Great generosity. “My cup runs over”: who in Fredericksburg does this remind you of?
4. V. 6 “goodness and mercy” = “grace and truth” (John 1:14). Words used to describe the presence/influence of God.

“follow” literally in Hebrew “pursue”

“dwell” verb indicates continuous action, starting now, not in future

“my whole life long,” literally “for the length of my days.”

What do we learn about the character of God?

Every moment of our lives, even when we go astray and are as dumb as sheep, God is always with us: in front leading us, beside us in moments of deepest despair, guiding and comforting us, providing more than we need to face every challenge of life, constantly pursuing us with love.

**Luke 15:11-32**

*The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother*

11Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself withthe pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ 20So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

25“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31Then the fathersaid to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

**NOTES on Luke 15**

1. Importance of context. How does the passage we are reading fit in with what was said before or after it?

**Luke 15:1-2**

1Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

What’s wrong with eating with sinners? We cannot understand who Jesus was or what God is doing in the world by sending Jesus without understanding this.

The Jews believed that they gained access to God by keeping the law. To ensure compliance and obedience, they elaborated on many of the OT laws, creating more and more laws (e.g., 569 laws related to the keeping of the Sabbath). They felt that if every Jew kept all the laws, even for one day, the Messiah would return. Primarily this rigorous practice of keeping the law centered for them around food laws (clean and unclean). Who was allowed (“clean enough”) to have a seat at the table? Not women, children, those with the “blemish,” non-Jews, the poor, “sinners”= a sociological group of people who had given up even trying to keep the law. Jesus associates and eats with all of these people. This is why the Lord’s Supper becomes so central to the identity of Christians. All have a seat at the table. What does that say about his understanding of God; about how one gets to God?

Jesus answers the Pharisees’ question with three parables—all say the same thing. Fundamental to the character of God is a love for sinners (a love for all). He never separates himself from them because of their sin, but constantly seeks them, and rejoices when they turn to Him.

* Luke 15:3-7, The Parable of the Lost Sheep
* Luke 15:8-10, The Parable of the Lost Coin

1. Jesus’ use of metaphor: In this chapter, Jesus portrays God as a shepherd, a woman, a father and a host.
2. This parable is often described as the Parable of the Prodigal son. Why is that an inadequate title?
3. The son “comes to himself” (v. 17) = the nature of repentance (he changes his mind, turns away and turns toward)
4. The love of God:

* Younger son: Nothing you can do to lose it
* Older son: Nothing you can do to earn it

1. Two points:

* First, these passages describe God and our relationship to God in ways that **distinguish Christianity from every other religion**. Every other religion starts with a quest to get to God (“Here’s what we have to do”). Christianity (at its best) starts with the free, absolute, complete acceptance and presence of God’s love, available to all (faith). There’s nothing we can do or say to get to God, to earn God’s love: no path to follow; no journey to take, no spiritual quest to the mountaintop, along which we must laboriously climb, no level of obedience that justifies our worthiness. Thinking that we can please God by our good behavior is akin to blasphemy. There’s no way to put God in our debt. Equally true is that there’s nothing we can do to lose God’s love: no sin, no mistake, no doubt, no failure. . Our access to God is completely depends on God’s character, God’s sovereign choice to love us with a love that is omnipresent and absolute for all humanity, whether we accept it or not, whether we are Christians or not. Note: all of this happens **before** the crucifixion and resurrection. This is the way God is and has always been (Psalm 23) from the beginning of time.
* Second, **our ability to live an abundant life depends not on obedience, but on our openness to God’s love, our relationship with God**. The actions of Christians who experience God’s love are not motivated by a requirement to be obedient (“I should do this to please God, because, if I don’t obey God, He will be unhappy with me, separate Himself from me, and I won’t experience His blessings”). Rather, our actions are motivated by the experience of being loved, “I can do this because I am loved and empowered by God, who is always present with me, no matter what.” I can’t earn it, I can’t lose it. Fundamental to the character is God is the love that seeks for me, waits for me, welcomes me, celebrates with me, leads me, comforts me, and pursues me. The Christian life is not a matter of works motivated by “I should,” but actions, words and deeds that are empowered by the Spirit of “I can.” The love of God makes our lives a free educational process where, because of the infinite number of chances that God give us, we learn (“turning”) to become more and more of who God wants us to be—a person who was created in His image to creatively reflect His love through everything we do and say. God’s constant loving presence in our lives, no matter what we do, no matter how flawed we are, gives us the chance to become increasingly what God intended us to be.