

The Lord is My Shepherd: A Psalm of Trust

Ps. 23, John 10:14-16; 27-9

I guess the two most recited and memorized passages of Scripture are the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. And with good reason: The Lord's Prayer encapsulates the message and ministry of Jesus, and the 23rd Psalm voices the deepest of human needs, to be cared for, guided and protected, by others and by God. It is a psalm of trust, the deepest form of faith, and it is written for all seasons of our lives, the best and the worst.

So let's ponder this psalm together in our hearts. You have heard it hundreds of times, but as Samuel Johnson said: "Humans need more frequently to be reminded than informed." Maybe this time it will open a new corner of your heart.

I

There's an essay by fiction writer Andre Dubus entitled, "Out Like a Lamb." He recounts the time when he and his family rented a house in New Hampshire from some friends. It was a kind of extended house-sitting, and part of the responsibility was taking care of the owners' eight sheep. He had this romantic association with pastoral scenes of sheep grazing, shepherds watching. As we, of

Jesus holding a lamb, of young David out in the fields watching over his father's sheep.

But his experience shattered his illusions. He found sheep to be impossibly stupid creatures. If indeed we are, as the Bible says, like sheep, we are not sweet, lovable, obedient animals, but to use Dubus' words, "stupid, helpless brutes, and without constant watching we would foolishly destroy ourselves."¹

His friends' sheep would make a hole in the fence and escape the pasture. To try to coax the sheep to re-enter by the hole they had made was a lost cause. They ended up chasing the sheep around the swimming pool, under trees, through brush until they got close enough to dive and tackle them. (Not an elegant pastoral scene.) It would take three of the family to lift the sheep up and drop it over the fence into the pasture. At first the routine had an element of fun about it; but soon it became tiresome, and their tackling grew angry.

I don't know if sheep are really that stupid, and I don't want to throw shade over any of God's creatures—we need to ask Neal Grose for a rebuttal—but have you ever seen trained sheep at a circus?

Maybe, however, that's a good entrance to this psalm, to see ourselves as sheep who often do not know what is good for us and who indeed need a shepherd.

At my last church I was asked what title I preferred, what I would like to be called. “Pastor”, I answered, but they resisted. They preferred the CEO sounding title of “Senior Minister.” A deacon said he didn’t like the pastoral association of the name because he and the church were *not sheep!*

Well, we do need a shepherd, and if the shepherd is God, is the good shepherd Jesus, we will be well led and cared for.

II

The Psalm begins: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Or, as one translation has it: “I have everything I need.” We may protest “So many do not have what they need!” The problem however is not in God’s supply; it is our distribution system. As Ghandi wrote, “There is enough in the world for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed.”

Now come the beautiful images. God “makes us lay down in green pastures, God leads us beside still waters.” The first dimension of this is that God provides food to eat and water to drink. But we have other deeper needs, spiritual, emotional, relational. Love, beauty, companionship. And these needs too often go unmet. The New Testament scholar Obery Hendricks says that what Jesus displayed in his ministry was that “our needs are holy to God.” God desires all our needs to be met. Again, the problem is not in the supply but in our distribution

system. We suffer in our unmet needs, and God comes to meet our needs. And God calls us to be shepherds alongside to help others have their needs met.

II

The psalmist now turns to another gracious activity of God: “God leads us in the paths of righteousness for God’s name’s sake.” What comes to mind when you hear the word “righteousness”? Purity, perfection? A better translation is “right paths.” And what are the “right paths” of God? Paths of love, justice, compassion, kindness; and right action that helps, not hurts.

And for whose sake are we led on the right paths? First, for God’s sake, for God’s name’s sake. We can mess up God’s reputation, but more than that, to be on right paths serves the will and purpose of God, the flourishing of all God’s children.

To be on the right path is not only for our sake, but for those closest around us. One can fall into such despair, apathy, no-caring, about our lives that we damage our own beautiful lives. But not only our lives, but the lives of those closest around, our family. To be careless about our life is to be careless about the lives of the ones around us.

So God leads us on the right paths.

When I visited Israel, I saw a shepherd at work watching her flock. Yes she was a *she*. She was a young, dark-skinned Bedouin woman dressed in robe and head covering. She was squatting watching her sheep. As a sheep began to wander from the flock, she picked up a rock and fired it like a Major League catcher behind home plate rifling a ball to first base. She hurled the rock just outside the sheep's wayward path and turned it back to the flock. I watched her do this a number of times, to first base, then third base, keeping the sheep all together. She was good, skilled, attentive. The sheep were fortunate to have her.

God is such a shepherd to us all, working to keep us safely along the right path, safely in the flock.

III

That was the first stanza of the psalm. The images are beautiful and bright, green pastures, still waters, safe paths. Now we move to the second stanza and the images shift dramatically: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Literally the Hebrew says, "the valley of deep darkness." It may be the valley of the shadow of death, but there are other kinds of deep darkness. I think of the darkness of our minds, depression, despair, hopelessness. The darkness may be the ending of a marriage, losing your job, a financial reversal, a humiliating mistake or defeat, a protracted illness. We've all had our moments of deep darkness. We wonder if the darkness will last forever. But it will not, and as

long as it lasts, God is by our side. Someone has called Psalm 23 the “Nightingale of the Psalms”, God’s song in the night.

Yes though I walk through the deep darkness, I fear no evil, for you are with me.

Here is the faith by which we need to live:

I fear no evil
for you are with me.

Here in the darkness is what one has called “sightless trust”, what Paul described as “walking by faith, not by sight.” Our fear is quelled by the knowledge that God is with us, whether or not we can see it or feel it.

We meet evil. We are not alone. We can make it.

Now we move to the image of the “rod and staff.” “Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” An old Hebrew professor said of this verse, that we do not so much *see* the rod and the staff, as *feel* them. Remember, we are still in the dark.

Ever been in the darkness, anxious, and suddenly felt something that reassured you? A wall, a banister, a chair, a hand? So God’s rod and staff comfort us, reassure us. We get our bearings. They reassure us: I will not get lost; I will not wander so far I cannot find my way back. And if I do, the shepherd will come after me and carry me back in her arms.

IV

Now the last stanza, and it is pure joy. We see a light and start running to the light. We see the face of God all shining to meet us, God's arms ready to welcome us. And when we go into the house a feast is waiting for us. All the foods we've hungered for. All the kitchen smells that smell like home.

In the novel *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, a young man takes over the restaurant from the woman who owned it and had hired him. He renamed it The Homesick Restaurant. He cooked foods people were homesick for. What would that be for you?

The images have changed: a table, an overflowing cup, fragrant oils for anointing. Now God is host, and we have been promoted from sheep to *guests*.

And we have this even in the presence of enemies, the text says, for God is our home in the storm.

V

Did Jesus have this Psalm in mind when he told the parable of the lost sheep and lost son? When he turned water into Cabernet Sauvignon, when he ate and drank with tax-collectors and sinners?

Did he have it in mind when he said to his disciples:

I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also.

God's flock is larger than we can imagine. I hope this feels like good news to you.

My sheep hear my Voice and I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

Blessed assurance. Paul put it this way: "Nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God" (Romans 8:38). I've heard a lot of preachers who try to create salvation-anxiety in their hearers—Are you sure you're saved? Can you remember the moment you were saved? —to get people down the aisle.

Ministerial mal-practice. No one, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Conclusion

And now the final assurance: "Surely Goodness and Mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever!"

I like to capitalize them as names Goodness, *Tov* in the Hebrew. And Mercy, *Hesed* in the Hebrew, God's steadfast love and mercy.

My friend and exceptional preacher, Paul Duke, pictures Goodness and Mercy, as God's two sheep dogs. Always following us, making sure we make our way home.

Patient to psychiatrist: "Dr., I think someone is following me!"

Dr. to patient: "Oh, that's Goodness and Mercy!"

And now the last beloved line: "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." One of my favorite hymn settings of the 23rd Psalm is Isaac Watts' hymn "My Shepherd, You Supply My Need". Here is the last stanza:

The sure provisions of my God
 attend me all my days;
 O may your House be my abode
 and all my work be praise.
 There would I find a settled rest
 while others come and go;
 No more a stranger or a guest
 but like a child at home.

Home in the heart of God: where we all began and where we all shall be when life shall end.

But more than our future home, it is where we now can live.

Henri Nouwen describes it as moving from a House of Fear to the House of Love. We can move there today, and every day. This is the invitation of the 23rd Psalm. Our God will lead us there.

1. Andre Dubus, *Broken Vessels* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1991), 4.