

“A PSALM FOR THESE DAYS”

Psalm 23

April 26, 2020

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

The beautiful images of Psalm 23 never fail to draw us in. This is a vision of peace for an anxious spirit: still waters; lush green meadows, an over-flowing cup. The psalm is filled with words like *lead, comfort, restore, goodness, mercy* ... words that speak of healing, guidance, and provision: .

That vivid imagery and the promise of those compassionate words make this psalm speak so powerfully to us.

You wouldn't think at first that we'd feel such a connection with this psalm. Shepherds are not part of our everyday experience, and few of us have spent much time with sheep. Nor are we generally in the habit of picturing ourselves as sheep, which is what the psalm writer is doing in those first few verses. And yet, this psalm remains one of the most beloved passages in the whole Bible.

Is it the idyllic pastoral images we love so much? Or is it just the comfort of familiarity? Probably those are factors, but I think it's something deeper.

Pictures inspired by Psalm 23 usually show a stream winding through a green, green meadow. Or a shepherd with a sheep cradled in his arms. But the psalm is more than pretty pictures.

It's sometimes referred to as “the Shepherd Psalm” but actually this short text incorporates not one but two main metaphors to describe God.

First, there is the shepherd – providing for, leading, healing, and protecting the sheep. The speaker in the psalm is one of the sheep – when we read it, each of us is one of the sheep, too: secure in the watchful and nurturing care of the shepherd.

Then, midway through the psalm, the metaphor shifts. Now the psalmist invites us to picture a gracious host (or maybe a cook) who lovingly plans, prepares, and spreads a table - a feast of good things – before her guests. We are not sheep anymore in this metaphor, but guests who are welcomed, whose cups are never empty.

The perspective is that of an individual who feels blessed and grateful.

But I want us to look again at those two pictures the psalmist paints for us.

While our focus is usually – naturally - on the sense of comfort and nurture those pictures convey, I want us to notice that into each of those two metaphors, the psalmist has incorporated a bit of darkness, an awareness of danger.

A sheep may find himself or herself walking through “the valley of the shadow of death.”

A guest at the abundant table is not without enemies, or perceived enemies, or things to be feared.

Now, if you or I were tasked with writing a comforting poem involving a shepherd and a banquet, we would put in things like pleasant, green, flowery fields and a softly rippling stream, a pretty table with bowls of beautiful fruit and other good things to eat. But we might be inclined to leave out unpleasant things like enemies, danger, fear, death, evil, and dark times.

But the genius of the psalmist is that he *does* included those rough edges amidst the beauty and comfort. You *could* edit those bits out, but you couldn't do so without muting the power of those two metaphors.

The valley of the shadow of death and the enemies nearby are what make us know that this psalm is really for us and not for some other hypothetical people living safe, beautiful, perfect lives. The shadow of death and the fear of danger are what make the guidance, the comfort, the provision, the protection the psalmist describes not only meaningful, but necessary.

People who don't live with sorrow don't need comfort.

People who have nothing to fear don't need protection.

People who are not lost or uncertain don't need guidance.

People who have no needs don't require assurance that there will be enough.

We are not those people.

We have plenty to grieve and fear,

We have a future we can't quite see yet and aren't sure how to plan for.

We have needs we know we can't meet on our own.

So the promises of this psalm are for us.

I want us to notice that the psalmist does not suggest that the valleys can be avoided entirely, or that the enemies can simply be vanquished or disappeared.

The psalm's affirmation is simply that God is present when we come to these times.

Lending us courage when we are walking shadowy paths of grief.

Sustaining us with all we need even when we have to face people and situations that seem like threats.

“You are with me,” the psalmist says to God. Preacher Samuel Wells says that here we find “...the most important word in the whole Bible. *With*.” He writes, “That's the word that sums up the Old and New Testaments. God created us out of a desire to be *with*. God called Israel out

of a desire to be *with*. God came among us in Jesus out of a desire to be *with*. God comes in our midst in the power of the Holy Spirit out of a desire to be *with*. God saves us out of a desire to be *with* us forever.... It's at the center of this psalm, ... it's at the center of our faith."

I'm not sure whether the psalm is suggesting that the awareness of God's generous love and leading in our lives helps us to discern God's presence in times of grief, or trouble, or threat. Or if it's the way God meets us in the difficult times that makes us more attuned to and grateful for the gifts of grace that restore our souls and sustain our lives every day. Maybe it doesn't matter.

At the heart of this psalm is a relationship of trust that sustains us in plenty and want, joy and sorrow, sickness and health.

Notice something else:

This psalm is not a lecture or essay or a quote for an inspirational plaque. It's a prayer. It's meant to be spoken by us, to God.

Many of us can say the words of this psalm by heart.

What I would like to encourage us to do is *pray* it from our hearts as well.

I don't subscribe to sentimental or magical ideas about prayer (You know the kind of thing I mean: "if you pray this prayer in a certain way for so many days it will change your life"). I don't think prayer works like that. Prayer is a conversation within a relationship, and you can't reduce a relationship to a formula for getting something you want. I don't believe prayer, even the most heartfelt prayer, always "changes things," as some people will suggest. But I do believe prayer changes *us*. And a prayer as wise and rich and deep as the 23rd Psalm has a lot to teach our anxious souls.

We might not understand every word or phrase at first. We might not notice all the nuances of each image. We might not see exactly what it has to do with our lives. We might not even *feel* the things the psalm expresses. But praying it attentively, and continuing to pray it, living with it (or within it), letting its words have their way in us, just might help us to find, or find again, our dwelling place in God.

When we understand that this psalm is from the perspective of need, fear, sorrow, lostness... we understand that it is *our* prayer, for times like these.

When we realize that in spite of need, fear, sorrow, and lostness, we are blessed in ways we could not have arranged for ourselves...

we can perhaps be ready to pray this prayer from our hearts,
to begin to exercise the trust it holds,
to choose the gratitude it expresses,
to rest in its solace,
to take hold of its courage.

This psalm is a gift. I don't think it's ever seemed more needed or beautiful than it does today. I plan to make it part of my prayer in this season of waiting. I hope that it can be your prayer too, in these days, starting perhaps with this hymn version.

***The Lord's my Shepherd, all my need will surely be supplied;
By quiet streams and through green fields the Lord will be my guide.***

***The Lord revives me, guides my feet on pathways that are right.
And I shall fear no evil though I walk through darkest night.***

***Your rod and staff, they comfort me; In presence of my foes.
You feed me; you anoint my head and my cup overflows.***

***Your goodness and your mercy, Lord, shall surely follow me,
And I will dwell in God's own house for all eternity.***

(#175, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*)

Resources:

Samuel Wells, "The Ten Joys: Psalm 23" in *Journal for Preachers*, Volume XLIII, Pentcost 2020.
John B. Rogers, Catherine L. Kelsey, David L. Petersen, and William F. Brosend , "Psalm 23" in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*