

## **“WISDOM FROM PSALM 23”**

John 10:1-10; Psalm 23

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We say that a picture is worth a thousand words. I don't know what we can say about words that paint a thousand pictures in our minds ... but that's what Psalm 23 does. Its rich and evocative images make this text accessible to just about everyone, and one of the most beloved passages in the whole Bible.

There are a couple of pitfalls to be aware of, though, when reading a passage that we've heard so many times and perhaps might name among our "favorite Bible verses." One is that we allow the comfort of familiarity in the words just sort of wash over us, wrap us in its embrace, and reassure us of the solidity of our faith. There's nothing wrong with comfort and reassurance, but it's pretty easy with such familiar words to stop paying attention to what they're actually saying. And then without even realizing it, we're missing out on what they can teach us, and probably even on some of the ways they could comfort us more deeply. I hope that today we can do better, and really attend to what the words and images of this text have to say.

Another pitfall is the assumption that, with their beautiful language and imagery, and because so many people find these familiar verses comforting, this psalm is just too sentimental to be meaningful to anyone who wants a real-world faith concerned with justice, and life's big questions, and what it means to follow Jesus. It certainly is true these verses have frequently been used to bolster an individualistic and sentimental kind of religion... but that's a shame, and doesn't do justice to this depth of this psalm. There is a great deal of wisdom here, and I hope to lift up a bit of it for us this morning.

I started thinking about Psalm 23 from the perspective of wisdom mostly because, thanks to our Art Festival theme, I had wisdom on my mind – specifically wisdom that pertains to how we human beings choose to live in and relate to the earth. So of course the images of "green pastures" and "still waters" leapt out at me. It's quite striking that the first thing the psalmist says about God's shepherd-like guidance is that it brings the one who is led into these natural places. There's been a lot of research in recent years about the restorative power of nature but this psalm was telling us the same thing long ago. Connecting with nature is good for us – reduces stress, alleviates depression, improves cardiovascular functioning, among other benefits. It helps our mood, allows us to regain perspective, and makes us aware of God's presence. It restores our souls. And we might have known this all along, if we'd been paying close attention to this psalm.

This picture of the divine Shepherd leading us into green spaces and beside bodies of water suggests that there's wisdom to be found in such places. Attention to nature, to the way God's

creation works, teaches us things we need to know: That interdependence is a fact. That what we nurture grows and flourishes, and what we fail to nurture will struggle (which is true of so many things – flowers, children, community, faith...). That each member of a community has a place and a role to play, and is important. That there is beauty in diversity. That everything has a need for rest and renewal. That there is always more to learn. So much wisdom God has laid out for us to discover!

Despite what we may have thought, this psalm doesn't offer the shallow comfort of platitudes and sunny optimism masquerading as faith. In fact, there's a thread running throughout that recognizes deep and real needs. For guidance and wisdom (otherwise why imagine being a sheep in need of a shepherd?). For rest and refreshment for weary or anxious spirit. For protection. For comfort. The writer acknowledges the dark times – "the valley of the shadow of death," in some translations. Is it about fear and danger? Is it about grief? Either way, God's presence gives comfort and instills courage, but the dark valley is still very much a dark valley. And there are enemies. As the shepherd imagery gives way to a picture of a host and a table prepared, even in that abundant provision there's a hint of awareness that hunger is possible.

The psalm is a grateful affirmation of God's presence and help through it all, but it is most definitely a declaration of a faith lived in the real world and not in a bubble of obliviousness or denial. There's more honesty here than we might at first have thought, and if that isn't quite what we wanted from this psalm, it does make it a psalm that can be for us. A part of its wisdom, I think, is that you have to be able to acknowledge the need, the perplexity, the heartache, the sense of depletion before you can fully receive the guidance, comfort, and nurture that God is so ready to give.

Even having noted its underlying theme of need and trouble, Psalm 23 offers us the wisdom of perspective: it reminds us to notice that despite everything, life lived in the presence of God is a life of blessing. It might not always be exactly the kind of abundance we're hoping for, but the earth is filled with good gifts for sharing, and there is always more than one thing to be thankful for. There's much to be anxious about but there are ways to rest and restore our weary souls. When we are struggling, there's someone who understands. When we grieve, there is a community ready to surround us with comfort. Though the threats to our planet are many, the earth has amazing powers of regeneration, and all over there are people finding ways to help the healing. Though anger and hate do a lot of damage in our world, if you look for the helpers, they are there, helping to put the pieces back together. Though we mess up again and again, God's mercy follows us around, heaping grace upon us in spite of ourselves. Our cups overflow with reasons to bless God.

There's one more bit of wisdom I want to mention: near the end, the psalmist says, "you anoint my head with oil." In scripture, anointing can signify healing. But more often it is a sign of calling, leadership, and responsibility. It's a small detail, but it tells us that this psalm is not merely about personal and private comfort; the one who is shepherded, comforted, and nurtured is also sent and empowered to serve. Our culture may tell us "it's all about you," but

the scriptures never do. As we experience the goodness of God – forgiveness, comfort, healing, nurture – all that the love and presence of God gives us, our cups overflow, and we cannot help passing on those gifts to others.

Though nobody can say for sure who wrote this psalm, it's always been associated with Israel's King David, and we can easily see that it could be written from David's perspective. His story included all the difficult circumstances alluded to in the Psalm (plus some *really* destructive choices he came to regret), as well as many experience of God's presence and grace. He was also a shepherd, as a young man, before he was anointed with the responsibility of leadership. He might have come to think of himself as a "shepherd" of his people; I believe that's not an uncommon metaphor for the role of a king and other leader. But the perspective of the psalm turns that metaphor upside down: imagine a king imagining himself as a sheep in need of a shepherd. Everybody needs guidance, help, comfort... a shepherd. The psalm invites us into the wisdom of humility. It gently reminds us that a wise person recognizes their dependence on God. This psalm invites us to be willing to be guided and cared for, receptive to help and healing, accepting of mercy and comfort. This isn't easy wisdom for people who like to be independent and in control, who hate to admit weakness and need. But it's really important wisdom.

Psalm 23 speaks to us on a very personal and emotional level, but it also places us in a larger context of God's world, God's tender love and generosity, and Christ's call. It is deep wisdom for our relationship with God. For our relationship with the earth. For our relationships with each other. For our relationship with ourselves, even. It's wisdom to help us live a life of abundant trust, gratitude, and courage, even when things are hard and trouble is all around.

When we pay attention to this psalm's wisdom, we realize that indeed our cups do overflow with every kind of blessing, and the goodness and mercy are following us everywhere we go, every day, all day long. Amen.