

May 8, 2022

Psalm 23

"Imitating our Shepherd"

Today we are looking at a *well-known text*. We know it is harder to unpack these texts than those we struggle to remember. We love this Psalm. It speaks to us of God's care and faithfulness through all of life – even the hardest moments.

Today we are attempting the miraculous – to find good news and the presence of God in a text we have known and loved. There are many sources for such a study – my preferred well of knowledge and experience is the work of Dr. *Kenneth Bailey – son of Presbyterian missionaries* in the Middle East who grew up to be a Biblical scholar of great proportions in his own right – who is now of blessed memory.

Our Psalm begins with a common theme in scripture – ***God as our shepherd***. Indeed, the rest of the song is predicated upon this fact. The challenge of the imagery in the 23rd Psalm is that *Middle Eastern agrarian imagery* can be easily lost on those of us who are American city dwellers. For example, *what do we know about sheep?* Well, not much except, well, ***they aren't very smart***. It isn't a flattering image at all – But if God is the shepherd, we are the sheep; not the sharpest knife in the drawer, *defenseless, and often our own worst enemy*.

Also, most of us don't know that green pastures are available in the Middle ***East at most three months out of twelve***. So, to believe our shepherd brings us to green pastures is to give up the notion that *God is stingy with us* until we get it right. And we really do need to give that up. And those *still waters*? They are essential because sheep won't drink from moving water no matter how shallow. The description of the water and the grass is the illustration of ***our having what we need from our shepherd***.

As is common in this Psalm – there is a less than flattering implication for us when we talk about ***what God our shepherd does***. To say he *brings us back* – he restores our souls - means we are lost, our souls are damaged – we need God to work on us. Why do we love this Psalm so much? We are insulted at every turn. Perhaps we love it because we have suspected ***human nature is rarely our friend and God's nature gives us hope***. Each time our less than stellar traits are pointed out – our shepherd steps in to meet our need.

We are used to songs coming to their *climax at the end* – but the structure of Hebrew songs builds to the climax in the middle and then resolves to the end. The middle here is “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil – for you are with me – your rod and your staff comfort me.*”

To have faith is to trust. To trust in *life's most difficult moments* is everything. The rod and the staff are powerful images showing the shepherd both **protects and nurtures**. The rod is a powerful *offensive weapon*, and the staff is the tool of *comfort and guidance*. The whole package comes from God.

Perhaps the most surprising thing in this Psalm is casting God in the **role of a woman**. “*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemy – my cup overflows.*” To prepare the table is to cook the meal – and in the culture of the time that was *women's work*. When someone tries to convince you that the **patriarchy of the cultures** through whom our faith has come is somehow divinely inspired or that God is a man...remember that God does women's work to take care of us. Consider this a Mother's Day moment. Mothers are doing God's work, day in and day out. The kind of work we *cannot live without*.

Perhaps some of you **don't want** your head anointed with oil. I personally don't find that an inviting image. But I do want what it stands for – *God's hospitable welcome*. The welcome we *struggle to believe* is ours is given in an image which is not current in our time. Yet, to believe in God's welcome is powerful.

In the end, all this *good news packed in a short Psalm* calls us **to trust and imitate** our shepherd. Too often we have wondered if *we have lost the good will of God* because we aren't *smart enough, perfect enough, brave enough or worthy*. This is a dangerous line of thought because *we aren't any of those things*. We are sheep. But far from disqualifying us the 23rd Psalm describes how this reality calls forth God's care – which we are to imitate in our living.

There is good reason we love this Psalm. May we exult in its proclamation of God's great love for us embodied in all those ancient near eastern images. As we unpack these hidden gems may we find courage and trust – **not because of what we are or are not** - but because - in all the ways that it matters - the Lord really is our Shepherd.