

Goodness and Mercy

Psalm 23

There are so many reasons for me now to try to preach about this psalm. The simple poetry needs no further explanation; the familiarity with it causes us to get so immersed in its pacing, rhythms, and cadences that the essence and power of the psalm is often lost. The psalm is profoundly personal and intimate. So many of the psalms speak to the nations. This psalm sits up with the believer in the challenges of sleepless nights and uncertain days. Leon Roberts, brilliant composer of distinctively African American Catholic sacred music, penned words of his Psalm 23 responsory:

The Lord is my shepherd. There's nothing I shall want!

The provision of God is made available to the soul that trusts in God.

Gary V. Simpson

So let me tell you what I have learned of this Psalm. In the agrarian culture of ancient Israel, before fences contained grazing livestock, shepherds were essential guardians of economic capital. The Israelite marketplace and sacrificial rites required sheep for wool, milk, and for those who could afford it, meat. In the daily life of the shepherd, however, these fluffy creatures could be at turns affectionate, stubborn, stupid, aimless, passive, easily startled, and always hungry. Sheep are prone to wander off and become easily vulnerable. Foxes, wolves, and jackals knew this. A shepherd, therefore, needed to be strong but not overpowering. If the shepherd came on too forcefully, the flock would scatter and run away. If the

shepherd was too gentle or inattentive, passivity and distraction would bring a host of troubles.

The psalm's verbes suggests a journey from insecurity to safety. Although we like sheep may go astray, the Lord is both strong and gentle, a constant prodder and defender, leading faithful people on straight paths. The psalm's forward motion reflects both the wandering of Israel in the exodus to the promised land and a deeply personal journey with the Lord God.

The psalm begins with a firm establishment of the landscape and its inhabitants. The affirmation of God as shepherd is common in biblical literature (Pss. 28:9; 77:20; 78:52; 80:1; Isa. 40:11; and esp. Ezek. 34). By implication both the writer and reader of the psalm are sheep. It is a personal relationship—the shepherd makes *me* lie down, leads me, restores *my* soul—establishing a firm sense of the direct connection between the Lord and the faithful one. Because of this intimacy and God's providential power, the faithful will lack nothing. There is no void, no need to desire anything further, as well as the Gospels' admonitions against worry (Luke 12:22-31, Matt. 6:25-34) and Paul's assertion of the unassailable love of God (Rom. 8:35-39).

The psalmist artfully demonstrates God's faithfulness in the descriptions of the green pastures, the still waters, the paths of righteousness, describing the elements that both sheep and humans need: food, water, a path to travel. These are places for rest, refreshment, and renewed purpose. However these are not just any paths, but the *right* paths, all for the sake of God's name. The Lord leads the faithful down these paths not only for their benefit, but so that they may glorify the name of God in all the earth.

"What about when the faithful are not on the right path?" Here, the psalmist instructs us in the deceptive quality of evil. It is not the valley of

death, but the valley of the death shadow (*tsalmaveth*), the phrase is translated as "total darkness." Death has not yet come, but its shadow lurks over the faithful, creating a sense of darkness, futility, hardship, and despair.

Since the darkness is death's shadow and not death itself, the pilgrim may continue on. She will go forth without fear. The rod and staff, the shepherd's instruments of prodding, directing, and defending, are ever present. The shepherd uses these tools to protect the sheep, to ward off death's shadow and evildoers, and to continue corralling the sheep where they need to go.

Then the psalmist shifts from describing the Lord as shepherd to directly addressing God and speaking of the imagery of home, suggesting that at the end of the long, winding road, the faithful will arrive in a safe haven. The faithful are now seen welcomed in as fully human. Samuel Terrien notes that the Hebrew for "prepare" (*'arak*) also means "arrange," and that Palestinian shepherds during the Ottoman Empire were known to travel ahead and "arrange" a field for safe grazing. Upon arriving, the traveler finds a kingly table, a banquet, a feast. This extravagant reception has been set "in the presence of my enemies" (*tsarar*), those who threaten, intimidate, and even cause distress or a sense of being bound. Even here, the Lord will protect and vindicate the weary pilgrim.

The anointing of oil was an ancient convention of etiquette, with which any proper host would honor the guest. God's lavish hospitality is an overflowing cup. God will provide more than enough.

Finally, the psalmist is convinced of God's protection. She is home, certain that God's goodness and steadfast love (*hesed*) will follow. The faithful will remain in this house for all the length of days. God's leading and protection will be fulfilled. **Kent M. French**

This psalm is one of those places where the Christian reader is caught in the context of Christian identity. The very Christ image of the shepherd is unavoidably superimposed on this text. It is hard to separate David's shepherd from the good shepherd spoken of in John 10.

Who is the subject of this psalm? Is this about God, or about us, or about both? We know God is the shepherd and we are the sheep. Abraham Heschel, one of the twentieth century's most thoughtful theologians, said that the story of the Hebrew Scriptures is not our search for God but rather God in search of humans.

This psalm tells of an intimacy between God and those whom God has made and look at what we get:

- Led beside still waters
- Made to lie down in green pastures
- Restored in soul
- Comforted with rod and staff
- Fed in the presence of enemies
- Made to dwell in the house of the Lord

The psalmist also says goodness and mercy will follow us. However the psalmist gives us a troubling word to describe the pacing of these two attributes of God. Literally, "shall follow me" means "pursues, chases me down." Why would God want or need to do that with us? The entire Hebrew Scriptures drip with the goodness of God. This is a biblical perspective that actually began in the goodness of God in the very first days of creation. Simply put, God was and is good before the human was even created.

The goodness of God is in every place before we ever arrive at any particular place. The good things that happen to us along life's journey do not happen because we have arrived. God's goodness has already been where

we are planning to go. The goodness of God is so present that every direction that we turn to look, wherever we are, we bump into goodness again. The goodness of God goes ahead of us, clearing out new ground, pulling us to new terrain, lighting a pathway in the dark places of new possibility, opening doors that no one can shut.

But mercy—that is another consideration altogether. Mercy is made necessary and nonnegotiable soon after the human is created. Prone to both mistakes and missteps, sometimes deviously yet strategically placed, at other times just because of circumstances and surroundings, we need mercy. There is an amusement park in the Midwest where the grounds crew, the street sweepers, were dressed in formal clothing—the men in tuxedos with tails and the women with long, flowing formal gowns. Their simple task was to clean up behind the guests who threw garbage on the park grounds. They walked the streets with such extravagance just to clean up behind inconsiderate and thoughtless guests. Always smiling, always dressed impeccably. After a while, a guest was embarrassed to have such nobility picking up behind them. This is what God does. Not with grudge or spite. This God extravagantly picks up behind us, follows us.

We need mercy behind us, sweeping up the refuse we have inadvertently left in our wake; we need mercy to erase even the memory of our sins as God casts our sins as far as the east is from the west. Shutting doors that no one can open. Thank God we live between these two shielding and protecting provisions of God, sandwiched between the goodness of God in front and the mercy of God behind—no matter which way we turn. **Gary V. Simpson** Let us dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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