

Sermon – 4th Easter
Psalm 23
May 3, 2020

“From Cradle to Grave”

The image of a “good shepherd”, though not explicitly stated in Psalm 23, would have been uncommon if not unheard of in David’s time. David was a shepherd - that is how he is introduced to us in I Samuel 16, so he knew what they did. Shepherds were nearly as common on the hills of ancient Israel as blades of grass, but the sort of Shepherd most people thought of, and which David had in mind in writing this Psalm was not men who looked after animals but men who ruled as kings. In the ancient near East kings were routinely called “shepherds” and kings were powerful, but they were not kind. They were self-serving, not servants.

David is taking liberties by invoking a shepherd as a suitable image for God. Psalm 23 is a confession of faith – it’s almost like a personal testimony. Because kings in those days asked their subjects to take oaths of loyalty - David does precisely that - declaring who he is loyal to – his God, and why. David became a king himself, one of Israel’s best, but the biblical record of his rule shows he didn’t live up to the standard of good shepherd either. David once served in the court of King Saul of Israel until in a fit of jealousy Saul decided David needed to be done away with.

David is under no illusion about kings – he knows them in general and...he knows himself. He could write an “insiders” book on kings and their courts – a real tell all tale of compromise and deal making and the like. Therefore, it shows considerable humility on his part to confess that he needed a better shepherd for his own soul. And so, while this Psalm is takes aim at kings, it also takes aim at us –asking us where our loyalty is.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. And yet we do want, all the time, don’t we? We want comfort and order and safety and popularity and wealth, and, we’ll lets state the obvious we want out of our confinement and we want our normal lives back. To be human is to want – to seek until we are satisfied. Jesus, in our lesson from John 10, talks about how he came to give us life “in abundance.” What he meant is he came to satisfy our wants, to replace the thirst for the something we don’t have with a belief that in Jesus we have everything.

A definition of hell is I once heard said it is that place or state of being in which we want all the time, even we get what we want, but it never satisfies. In Mark 9:42-50 Jesus is warning his listeners about temptation and likens hell to that place “where the fire never goes out.” What he means I believe is that want is never quenched. *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want*, especially from the lips of a man – David, who as a king could and often did help himself to whatever he wanted, is a powerful reminder to, as Jesus said in Matthew 6:33 “*seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all things will be given to you as well.*” What a wonderful existence to be satisfied with God above all things.

This teaching about “want” is reinforced in the words “*He makes me lie down in green pastures.*” We commonly think of that phrase as a picture of repose, or rest. And that is alright. David the shepherd would have known what a delight it was to find a lush field to rest in the midst of a long day. But David in this Psalm, by making God his shepherd, is obviously making of himself...a sheep.

David the shepherd knew that sheep were not much different than humans – put them un-shepherded in a field of green lush grass and the critters would practically eat themselves into a stupor. Good shepherds knew that in a place of plenty...there is plenty of want. So, shepherds had to sit his charges down lest they indulge their appetites to death. And then lead them on. It’s hard to live among abundance, and not want it.

This is where the Psalm turns from as it were from a confession of sin – our tendency to want and want and want, to a confession of faith in God who gives and gives and gives. Here the Psalm blossoms into one promise after another and they keep getting better and better, foreshadowing our life with Christ. *He leads beside quiet waters...he restores my soul.* If I had but one word to describe that phrase it would be – forgiveness. God quiets a restless heart through his Christ and says...like our Lord Jesus did to the wind and the waves churning up a wild sea...shhh...be still, quiet down. Your life is wrapped in my forgiving grace.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Here you see the Lord doesn’t just lead us out of sin’s accusations, but into a way of life that oozes confidence in God’s ways over ours. Remember, David knew full well the self-serving ways of the kings of his day. He imbibed himself in those pleasures a plenty.

Nothing satisfied. So, God shows us something that does – a way of life where you discover you gain when you give and where you find your greatness and uniqueness the way Jesus found his – in being a servant of others.

No one is much going to pat you on the back for doing that. In this day and age, we'd be getting off easy if all people did was scratch their heads in wonder at us Christians. But the Psalm tells plain and simple what a Christ like life earns us – a world that wants to do away with you, trample you, dismiss you. *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”* it says. Allow me a couple of personal recollections of this very thing – not by way of boasting but just because it kind of took me by surprise.

A few years into our marriage Marcella and I had scrounged up enough money to start saving and investing and we filled out a form for our advisor telling her where our monthly income was going. To my wife's credit a matter of first importance was our giving, but evidently our advisor's assistant thought we were doing too much, so she called to verify the figure I put down, all but convinced I'd added a zero to the end and she hung up leaving me the impression they couldn't do much wealth building if all we were doing was wealth giving away!

A few years later when the Lord put on our hearts to leave our careers and try our hand at being missionaries to Tanzania, I got an exasperated phone call from my cousin's husband wondering “what the you know what” I was thinking leaving a career with my prime earning years just around the corner!

But the sober recognition in this Psalm that the world won't understand or think too kindly of a Christian life is coupled with a “pure as gold” promise for believers...*I will fear nothing, for you are with me, your rod and staff they comfort me.*” The Lord Jesus never leads us to a place, the popular saying goes, where his grace cannot keep us. Well that is best expressed by this Psalm – you see the good shepherd doesn't just point - he accompanies.

But it gets even better, which as I say with Jesus it always does. *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...my cup overflows.”* John 10:10 says; *“I came that they may have life and have it to the full.”* Now if you'll excuse me here is where I think our Lord is showing off a bit.

By that I mean he takes us and sits us down to feast right in front of those who the Psalm calls “enemies” – in Hebrew a word best understood as “*those who do not wish me well, who wish to see me fail, who would extract from me blessings I have received.*”

The Christian life to which the Lord leads will not go unnoticed unless we let it, unless we stop living it, and then those enemies, by their mocking or glaring or insulting or in the case of real persecution afflicting bodily, need to see that we have a cup of blessing just running over the edges – spilling out everywhere, Jesus Christ, full of mercy for those he loves, correcting and bumping our butts if need be with that staff of the Holy Spirit, but never letting us go “unaccompanied” through this world. And if you want another image, think of how in our confession of faith we say “*he descended into hell*” – that’s all the picture you need - our Savior, our Good Shepherd announcing to Satan himself “it’s over” – these sinners are mine, not yours!

And where does it lead – where does all this setting down and guiding and protecting take us? Well like I said, the Psalm saves the best for last, just like our Christ...it leads us into the house of the Lord forever. Even though this world shows us no favors – churns up our wants with its empty promises, even though it succeeds more than occasionally and our sinful selves make a mess of things – what does God do? He leads his sheep home – through the din we hear his voice and follow – nothing can snatch us from him. He’s got that rod after all, no comfort to those who hate us, but also he’s got those arms of mercy. In them you belong...to them you will dwell...forever. AMEN