

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

I Shall Not Want - October 11, 2020

Psalm 23

I don't know about you, but I need a break. The events of 2020 have been like an endless series of getting punched in the face. Just when one punch finishes, another starts. For me, I'm obsessed like a moth drawn to a flame, following the news, watching the polls, and praying that all this nonsense will soon come to an end. I lived in Africa for 10 years and the craziness we've been experiencing in our country was and still is the norm. Over there I was used to it. Here, I'm not. There, government officials would literally learn they'd been fired while they were driving to work and seeing the headlines printed in the newspapers sold along the side of the road. Here, our officials discover the same thing on their Twitter feed. My African friends are emailing me asking if we could use some advice in managing our democracy. Yes, I very much need a break and I imagine you do too.

In looking over the scripture passages for this week, we have the story of the people of Israel going crazy and making themselves a golden calf idol to worship because Moses had been on Mt. Sinai too long getting the Ten Commandments from God. People haven't changed much, have they? It is still much easier to put faith in objects and elevate human beings to God-like status than to trust in the presence of an invisible God. No matter how much God intervened in the lives of the Israelites, pulling them out of Egypt, saving them by parting the Red Sea, feeding them with manna and quails, it wasn't enough. The people always wanted more and more and more, instead of contentedly receiving what they truly needed.

In the New Testament, we find Jesus telling a parable of a King who wants to have a banquet. But when he sends the invitations, the messengers get beat up and even killed. So, similar to what happened in last week's sermon, the king invited a whole new set of guests, consisting of people who would not normally be welcomed. The point Jesus is making is that God parties with the people the world despises, just as God in Jesus Christ does today. Yet in today's parable, there is a little curve ball about a guest who came to the second party but was inappropriately dressed and the king kicks him out. This twist has baffled people. Many interpretations have been offered, but one that makes sense is that even when God invites us to the party and we accept God's invitation, we still have to take it seriously. In other words, if we're going to run around with a cross necklace or tattoo, we should actually be showing the world that we are following Jesus with our words and actions. If we are members of a church, we should be giving what we can of ourselves and attending regularly. If we believe there is a God, then we should have some appreciation of who God is and what God wants.

And all this leads to today's scripture, Psalm 23.

These are some of the most repeated words of scripture. We say them all the time at funerals, in hospitals, and during rough times. These are words that many people who avoid religion and church entirely are nevertheless aware of. Why? What accounts for the popularity of the 23rd Psalm?

By way of background, these words are attributed to David, the most-loved King of Israel and the ancestor of Jesus. David was not loved because he was perfect — far from it. David stole another man's wife and then had the poor husband sent to the front line in battle so he would be killed. David could be utterly ruthless in building and preserving his kingdom. What David wanted, David almost always got whether by playing according to the rules, or not.

Yet, David had one quality that endeared him to Israel back then, and for all time to come. David was human and never pretended that he was something he was not. I mean that unlike so many political and business leaders of all kinds all over the world today, David wasn't fake. Remember that David was the youngest son of a family that kept sheep for a living — the youngest of seven. If you're the youngest in your family, you know all about the unique position you have with regard to your aging parents as well as your older siblings. Both spoiled a bit and beaten up a bit. David knew his family business and spend his youth tending the sheep and perfecting his skill with the slingshot. This is the same David who as a teenager had the confidence to go up against the giant Goliath armed with only a few stones and a sling — and he won.

David was confident, he was strong, he was charismatic, and made some pretty huge mistakes in his life. But through it all, he was always in relationship with his God. When he triumphed, he gave thanks to God. When he sinned, he repented and accepted responsibility. He never claimed to be perfect but he did claim to have unending faith in the God that took him from being a poor shepherd boy to the King of Israel. David, in short, was genuine and that is certainly a quality we all seek in people we say we admire. David is said to have written nearly half of all the Psalms and his poetry endures because he spoke from the heart. He spoke to real human need, loss, and suffering as well as joy, confidence, and hope.

So this is the author of the 23rd Psalm: a sinful man, yes. A man who made terrible mistakes, yes. A man whose God told him he was unworthy to build a temple to God because there was too much blood on his hands — and David agreed he was unworthy. So when he writes, "The Lord is my shepherd," he knows exactly what he is talking about, because he knew that he did not deserve to have the life he had. It was all a gift from God.

After all, what is a shepherd, anyway?

A shepherd, ideally, is a person who insures that the sheep entrusted to his care are safe, fed, and watered. A shepherd is aware at all times of the status of every one of the sheep entrusted to his care and knows when any of them get lost or is in some kind of trouble. It was and remains a dirty, stressful, underpaid job. Shepherds lived in the heat and cold and the rain and the snow with the sheep. They had to drive off predators, both human and animal. Of course, like in all occupations, there were good shepherds and bad ones. Most, shepherds, to be honest, were bad. They didn't care, they ran away, and they often stole the sheep they were supposed to be protecting. Shepherding was what people did when they couldn't do anything else. That's why Jesus called himself the "good shepherd" to distinguish himself from the many bad shepherds out there.

So, David, an expert in the shepherding occupation, begins his Psalm by saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." I think it's fascinating that David begins by calling God his shepherd. Think of it. If King David is calling God his shepherd, that means he's calling himself a sheep! How can that be? This rich and powerful king is happily calling himself a sheep, an animal, a defenseless animal which cannot possibly care for itself. In short, by calling himself a sheep, David is placing himself in a position of total dependence on God. God is the shepherd and he is just another sheep.

But isn't that the question for all of us? Are we willing to classify ourselves as helpless, hopeless sheep who need a shepherd to guide us all the time. Now it's easy to understand why Psalm 23 is so popular at funerals and in hospitals. Those are places and times where we really do feel uncertain and vulnerable. When we're at a funeral or lying in a hospital bed, we are undeniably aware that we are not in control. We have many worries and questions. We have to be taken care of by others, like it or not. We know, at those times, we need a shepherd to take care of us.

However, David isn't saying in the 23rd Psalm the Lord is my shepherd only when he's uncertain. David is saying the Lord is his shepherd always—certainly in bad times but even in good times. And that, friends, is the critical issue of life.

Most of us pride ourselves on being independent. We go through life believing we are in control of our lives most of the time. Sure, we might get sick a day or two, we might have a rough time with a relationship or on the job. But by and large we like to think we're in charge most of the time. We only need a shepherd — we only need God, in other words, when we're having problems.

Is that the kind of relationship we have with God? Do we only turn to God in emergencies? Have we convinced ourselves that faith is something we turn to only when we have to? Otherwise, God is just someone we keep in the basement and dust off once a year or so at Christmas.

As for David, he is admitting that although is a king, he needs God in his life all the time, not just in the bad times. Whether as a shepherd boy chasing wolves, or facing Goliath, or fighting the enemies of Israel, or yes, repenting from his very terrible sins, David was very much aware of God's constant presence in his life. David never forgot God's place in his life and so he was proud to confess the Lord was his shepherd.

And with that confidence, he could then make the statement, "I shall not want." In other words, he trusted in God taking care of him. Now you might think, "Sure, that's easy for King David, he lived a palace and had servants and plenty of money, of course he isn't going to want for anything." But as David knew only too well, he very much did want things that he had no business desiring. He stole another man's wife and had her husband killed. David understood deep down that kings, just like all of us, should not get everything they desired, even they if had the power and money to attain whatever they wanted. Even kings needed to be restrained. Even kings had limitations.

David wrote the 23rd Psalm to assert his personal need to be fully dependent on God. Life had taught him that unless he recognized his total dependance on God for every aspect of his life, he would have problems. David knew he could not pretend to turn to God only when was convenient for him, he needed God in his life all the time.

Where does that leave us? How willing are we to accept the idea that we need a shepherd in our lives? We are not independent. We cannot make it by ourselves. Thinking we can live a meaningful life apart from God is an illusion because as soon as we think we have our act together, something comes along to knock us backwards. But the hardest part is trusting that God will provide not what we want, but what God says we need — and being OK with that. David was no different from us in thinking that he knew better than God. But time and again life slapped him in the face and reminded him that he was indeed just a sheep who needed a shepherd.

Until, friends, until we can honestly and objectively look and ourselves and accept the fact that we are all sheep who need a shepherd, all this church stuff, all this Jesus talk, truly doesn't make sense. We live in a world where people think they can go it alone — and you can see for yourselves what that attitude has produced.

David's message is plain: admit to yourself that you are a sheep, a sheep that needs help every single day. But be a sheep, a happy sheep, who knows that even though you are a sheep, you are cared for throughout your life and beyond your life by the shepherd who gives you exactly what you need. Accept this truth, and you will be content.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.