

April 26, 2015  
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Psalm 23

### Psalm 23

Every week in church, just before we come to the Lord's Table, we say the Lord's Prayer. It's a prayer that connects people of all places and times, living and dead. It's a prayer that describes our relationship with God and what we need. It's a prayer to know by heart. Today, a Sunday known on church calendars as Good Shepherd Sunday, we have a psalm to know by heart, Psalm 23.

The book of psalms can be thought of as a book of prayers, so said the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was born Germany, lived there in the 1930s and 40s, in the decades leading up to World War II. As a person of faith, Bonhoeffer engaged in civic action. His concern for justice and for the vulnerable led him to be part of a movement of resistance to the Nazi's. For this Bonhoeffer was imprisoned, and on April 9, 1945, executed. Before his imprisonment, and also during it, Bonhoeffer was a writer, including a writer of letters. In the years leading up to his arrest, Bonhoeffer gained attention for his actions and words. After the publication of one of his books, the Nazi regime forbade him to publish anything else. The title of that book is *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*. Hitler's evil regime could not contend with the claim of this book, the claim of prayer, the claim of the psalms: that our ultimate allegiance is to God. Such is the claim, and the comfort, of Psalm 23. It describes our relationship with God, and what we need.

*The Lord is my shepherd.* We have a leader, we have a caregiver, we have someone to look to who will look out for us. That's what a shepherd does: tends to, watches over, cares for, creatures who need are prone to wandering, who get stuck in predicaments, who, to leering predators, look like lamb kebabs. We are such creatures, sheep in need of a shepherd, and we have one, the Lord. Not anyone, or anything else, but *the Lord is my shepherd*. How often we give our allegiance elsewhere, think other things ought to or will protect or guide us: the opinions of others, the corporate ladder, the bottom line is my shepherd. No. How much we need this reminder: The Lord is my shepherd. God knows what is good for us and for our lives. God knows where we should be heading, and how to get us there. *The Lord is my shepherd,*

*I shall not want.* I want a lot of things, some materialistic, some idealistic. I want good food and a comfortable home. I want joy and contentment. I want a sense of accomplishment. I want to not worry. God wants these things, too, for me, and for you. God wants us, wants all sheep, in other flocks, and this flock, to have our material needs met: food and shelter, and God wants our spirits to be nourished and protected, too. God wants for us an existence characterized not by wanting, but by trusting; a life and a living that is not defined by emptiness, but by blessing. With God as our guide, we shall not want, we shall not be in want. God leads us to places that provide peace and sustenance, satisfaction and pleasure.

He makes us *lie down in green pastures, and leads us beside still waters*. How sensual are these images of abundance and contentment: the thickness and softness of a bed of grass, the cleansing and calming presence of water. Such are the places to which God takes us, the state in which we live, with the Lord as our shepherd. Even in the concrete of urban Illinois and the cold of this past week, we can sense this. We can see the wonder of the natural world: the tulips and daffodils asserting themselves, the tree branches flocking ever fuller with sprays of lime green.

All of it speaking to us of the nature of God, of the restorative nature of God. This is the world God makes and gives to us, leads us to lie down in, look at, listen to, rest in.

The pastures, the waters, they are for you, *to restore you, to you restore your soul*. That's what God does, God restores us, restores our souls. That's why God leads us, because we have a soul, and it can be restored, by God, being led by God in paths of righteousness. These ways, these paths, they are laid out before us. They are grooves in the road, the original Hebrew says. God's paths are guides you can follow, grooves to get in, good grooves. Get in them, follow him, be lead *in the paths of righteousness*.

Walk those paths, knowing also, that at times the way is treacherous. The natural world is not just beautifully benign. There are dark valleys—natural, and man-made. There are threats to existence, to life itself. Yet even there, yes, even in the darkest valley, *yeah, even in the valley of the shadow of death*: the jail cell, the hospital room, the chasm of depression, the soul shaking experience of natural disaster, God is with us, even there, even then. God is with us at the beginning, *The Lord is my Shepherd*, God is with us at the end, *the house of the Lord forever*, so also in the very middle of life, God is with us—just as this assertion is in the very middle of this psalm. In the original Hebrew it is precisely in the middle, and in the English pretty darn close, that is, if you count from the beginning and the end, as if searching for the mathematical median of psalm 23, it is: “*You are with me*” right there, in the middle of the psalm. In the middle of life, in the middle of it all, even when danger is right there, so is God, with signs: *rod and staff*, symbols of God's presence, reminders of God's care, psalms and prayers, comforts to see and hear and repeat.

Even with evil at hand, even with enemies right beside us, God gives us signs. God *prepares a table before us, in the presence of enemies*. The Lord did just that on the night that he was betrayed. He took bread and blessed it, and his betrayer was there. So were others who would deny, desert, doubt. The Lord sets a table in the presence of enemies—for us, even when we are enemies: enemies to one another, enemies to ourselves, enemies to God,.

The table is set for us, there's a place for all there. Today there's a special place for Ryne, Alice, and Elena, as they join us at the table prepared for the Lord's Supper. We hear Psalm 23 in Holy Communion, we hear Psalm 23 in Holy Baptism our heads are *anointed with oil*. These sacraments, these signs of God's presence, remind us that our lives are not characterized by lack. With the Lord as our Shepherd, we do not want, our *cup runs over*. *Goodness and mercy* have been given to us, and continue with us, *following us*, even pursuing us, *all the days of our lives*.

Psalm 23 is often repeated at funeral services, as we remember those who have died. Psalm 23 connects us with those people, with saints who have died. Psalm 23 is also something to live by, all the days of our life. It is there in the bulletin, it may also be written on your heart. Say it, pray it, with me now:

**<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.**

**<sup>2</sup>He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters.**

**<sup>3</sup>He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.**

**<sup>4</sup>Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;**

**For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**

**<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;**

**You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.**

**<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life;**

**And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**