

Sermon: Psalm 23 (Easter 4)  
Christ Church Riverdale, 13 April 2008  
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The LORD is my shepherd; \*  
    I shall not be in want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures \*  
    and leads me beside still waters.  
He revives my soul \*  
    and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.  
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; \*  
    for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \*  
    you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.  
Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, \*  
    and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

One of the ripple effects of Easter being unusually early this year is that the Fourth Sunday of Easter, what we call “Good Shepherd” Sunday, falls during the Masters golf tournament. I’ve been able to watch a little here and there, and talk about green pastures, still waters, and right pathways (known in golf as fairways)! Golf originated on sheep pastures in Scotland, and the course where the Masters is played—Augusta National—is all about green grass and still waters, with beautiful trees and flowers thrown in. Even the paper cups and sandwich wrappers are green so that if somebody misses the trash can the litter blends right in with the lush grass.

The green pastures, still waters, and right pathways of Psalm 23 are familiar to us, dear to us; they give us comfort in times of sorrow; they are some of the first parts of the Bible children learn. This morning I’d like to dig deep underneath the familiarity of the words to experience even more of the riches of this most beloved psalm. (I’ll be referring to the Prayer Book translation we read together today rather than the King James Version many of us first learned it in.) If “the LORD is my shepherd,” then yes, I’m a sheep, but given that “shepherd” was so commonly used as an image for a king, the beginning of Psalm 23 is also saying God is my ruler, my sovereign. “I shall not be in want,” that is, in a state of need. Another way to translate it is, “therefore I lack nothing.” (And remember, the person who wrote this psalm didn’t even have an iPod, much less an iPhone!) “I shall not be in want;” there’s nothing I need. Why? Because my shepherd is providing everything a sheep could need.

“[God] makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.” There’s a temptation to get overly sentimental about shepherds in the Bible, especially as they’re pictured in stained glass. But God doesn’t *suggest* that I might want to lie down in green pastures or *ask* if I’d like to find my own way to the still waters. Sheep can be stubborn, so a good shepherd has to do some “making” and “leading” for the good of the sheep--to provide what they truly need.

“[God] revives my soul.” We could translate, “God sustains my life,” as an ancient Hebrew would not say *I have* a soul but *I am* a soul. Re-viving is putting life back into our souls--our selves--just as God breathed life into Adam at creation. “[God] guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake.” “Right pathways” can also be translated, “paths of righteousness.” The paths where shepherds led their flocks weren’t marked; you’d need an experienced shepherd. Sometimes what looks like the best path ends up leading nowhere, while the path most difficult at first can become the most rewarding. God guides us to do the right thing, “for his Name’s sake,” the psalm says. In Biblical culture a name didn’t just convey what a person was called; a name conveyed one or more of a person’s qualities, or the person’s deeper nature. So God guides us along right pathways not because we particularly deserve it, but because that’s the kind of integrity God has.

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.” This can be connected both with death itself—when death is near for ourselves or a loved one, and to what we call the “dead of night,” the darkest and most frightening of times for any number of reasons. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil,” and then there’s a huge and very important shift in the psalm. We shift from “The LORD is my shepherd, provides pasture and water” to, “I shall fear no evil, *for you are with me.*” The psalm shifts from talking *about* God to talking *to* God. God is with me; not that the darkness is any lighter, or that death is any less real, but I am never alone because God is not remote or preoccupied, but is right here with me. “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” This image suggests the kind of comfort that is strengthening (like fortitude) more than soothing. A shepherd’s stick was used to beat off attackers and its crook was used to yank errant sheep back into line or out of danger.

“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.” No it’s not that we face no trouble--no enemies in King James language. Instead, by trusting God to provide for us and fearing no evil because God is with us . . . we can relax enough to sit down and have a meal, even with very serious troubles, very real enemies! Our heads are anointed like a guest of honor at a feast, or a king. In our days of tall, venti & grande at Starbucks a cup running over is no big deal, but consider how powerful it is in an arid country. When getting enough to drink was a daily challenge and issue of survival, a cup running over points to incredible abundance, and perhaps to long-term security.

“Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” “Follow” is a bit of a weak translation—the sense of the word here is more of pursuing. God’s righteousness and steadfast love are going to chase us--keep after us—and call on us to act in those ways. “And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.” In other words, my true home will be not in a building but in relationship. I will be part of the household of the God who creates us, redeems us and sanctifies us. “The LORD is my shepherd; . . . I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.” Psalm 23 begins and ends with the holy name of God considered so sacred in Judaism as to be unpronounceable, and so Jews and Christians substitute “the LORD.” This God is with us . . . nourishes us . . . gives us courage; this God keeps after us with righteousness and steadfast love so that we will come to share those qualities in our own lives.

A few years ago I had the privilege of attending the Masters tournament because a generous friend shared admission badges that have been in his family for years. (For a golfer this is like a Roman Catholic scoring tickets to the Pope’s mass in Yankee Stadium next week!) But it rained a lot the year I went to the Masters, and I’ll tell you: the rain made it evident that all of the lush green grass at Augusta National is fed by a lot of, shall we say, “organic fertilizer.” Life with God as our shepherd isn’t easy, isn’t without its troubles; it doesn’t always “smell good.” But God is with us profoundly; God is with us powerfully; God is with us eternally . . . and God welcomes us home!