

**“Psalm 23: The Shepherding God”**  
**by Rev. David J. Wood**  
The 4th Sunday in Lent: March 15, 2025  
First Congregational Church Camden, Maine

**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 paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
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 forever.

**John 10: 11-16**

[And Jesus said to them,] “I am the good shepherd.  
The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.  
The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep,  
sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away,  
and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.  
The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.  
I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me,  
just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father.  
And I lay down my life for the sheep.  
I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.  
I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.  
So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

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Shepherding has a long history in the Bible.  
For example, those who are named as shepherd include:  
Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob & Rachel, Moses & Zipporah, and, of course, David.

In the New Testament...Shepherds were the first to be called to the manger.

One of the most common images found among the relics of the earliest Christian communities, inscribed on gems, in seals, fragments of glass, was the Image of Jesus as the Good shepherd... often an image of him bring a lost sheep home.

Jesus took on the image of the Good Shepherd...who cares for the sheep.  
He had compassion as he looked upon the crowds who came to see him,  
They were like “sheep without a shepherd.”

There were many images from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus could have identified with:  
King, Judge, Fortress, Avenger, Almighty...

The one he chose first and foremost was: the shepherd.

In contrast to the Greco-Roman world...Jesus came into the world not as a raiding King or Ruler, but as a shepherd who acted pastorally, keeping and restoring his people.

*"I am the good shepherd.  
The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."*

I guess that makes us sheep...most of us don't know a lot about sheep.  
One sheep herder with many years of experience with sheep...observed:

*sheep are the dumbest creatures God made.  
A sheep with her head stuck loosely between two slats of a fence  
will just stand there, frozen with terror, and without intervention will starve.*

One thing is for sure: sheep need close supervision...they need to be tended, cared for,  
They wander, they get stuck, speaks to a certain kind of vulnerability – not equipped with big teeth, or  
claws, even dependence...

I think that fits us humans pretty well.

That recognition is why Psalm 23 resonates with us...  
Safe to say, it is the only text of Scripture more memorized is the Lord's Prayer.

It opens up a horizon that broadens whatever space we may find ourselves in.  
We are prone to get hemmed in by the moment...the circumstances of our lives...  
Especially those circumstances that are fearful and oppressive...

The Psalm, this prayer, this song, opens up a sky light...  
when our worlds have become too small  
Whenever we have become closed in or closed off  
Or we have become too sedentary, or just plain stuck...  
Or when we feel driven, our pace frantic or frenetic  
Or when our spirits are tempted to despair or resignation  
We feel overcome by sense of scarcity...

This psalm comes like a healing, soothing lotion to soul...  
It has been handed on to us by the great company of those who have walked this way before us...  
It speaks of rest, contentment, comfort, abundance, mercy and goodness...

That being said, it does not comfort by simply distracting us from unpleasant, unnerving, realities that  
threaten to undo us:

The psalmist speaks of the reality of evil,  
the experience of fear,  
of walking in the shadow of death,  
and existence of enemies...  
these realities are not denied or written out of the story...  
They are part of how and where we encounter God...  
the God who is with us...in the midst of our lives  
It names the truth of our lives and the reality of the good shepherd...

The Lord is *my* shepherd...  
It is personal...  
a very different phrase than the Lord is *a* Shepherd.  
It signals, invokes a personal relationship...  
Evokes a nearness, an attentiveness.

A German sociologist whose work I have come to admire, Hartmut Rosa, suggests that the central and extraordinary message of the Bible is nothing less than,

*"the idea that at the root of our existence, at the heart of our being, there is not a silent, indifferent or repulsive universe, dead matter or blind mechanisms, but a process of resonance and response: someone who hears us and sees us, and who finds ways and means to touch us and to respond, who breathes life into us in the first place."*

*I shall not want...  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures  
He leads me beside still waters.*

We live in a culture that leads us into want, that seeks to translate our wants into needs and our needs into necessities. We, however, are those who are being led in a different direction...

*He restores my soul...  
Leads me in paths of righteousness  
For his names sake.*

This restoration has a meaning that is akin to being rescued...  
recovered...retrieved. He brings us back to the right path...  
The truth is, we are prone to wander...

Thank God that God is paying attention!  
for *his name's sake*...  
He cares for me as one of his own...the association runs deep like the care a mother has for her child.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil...  
For Thou art with me.  
Thy rod and thy staff,  
They comfort me.*

Here is the unmistakable turning point in the Psalm...when it comes to the darkest and deepest passage, the Psalmist ceases to speak ABOUT the shepherd...and instead he speaks directly to the shepherd... as the one who is there...guiding, guarding, protecting.  
Language is unmistakably personal and intimate...

The image here is of a kind of valley that would be familiar to that part of the world –  
An actual valley 5 miles long, wall rise high on either side...  
It is a shadowed place...and dangerous...flash floods, falling rocks, and wild beasts..  
This valley, is 12 feet at the widest point...and at points so narrow, a sheep passing through it cannot even turn round....

The rod protects...and the staff prods and guides and, if need be, rescues...  
So that even in a fearful place, I am able to keep moving through...it is not the end of the road...  
We cannot read this as a witness to the incarnation...  
"God with us". To the one who says, "I will be with you".

*You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies..*

He comes to us, into the most inhospitable circumstances of our lives...  
with love and care, and sets up a table there...

Not accidental that a meal is at the center of our life...as a reminder of where God is, and how God is  
with us.

*You anoint my head with oil*

*My cup overflows...images of abundance and blessing...*

To anoint a guest with oil was gesture of welcome and honor.

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*

As One translator puts it: *This God dogs our steps...we cannot escape his presence if we tried.*

Goodness and mercy are following behind...

not my messes, not my failings and fallings...

There is a grace that ties up all those lose and split ends of our lives.

I'm reminded by the great quote from Bryan Stevenson, the civil rights lawyer who is known for his work  
on defending prisoners on death row:

"Each of us is more to me than the worst thing I have ever done.

... we all need mercy, we all need some measure of unmerited grace."

*And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

There is a destiny that charts our course...we are all on a journey home...

We live in a time when the past seems increasingly irrelevant as a guide to an unprecedented present and  
a precarious future. We lose a sense of narrative...of flow...of being in time...time feels out of joint.

To live into this Psalm, to let this prayer speak to us, the past becomes informative as a guide, the future  
becomes oriented by a sense of destiny, and the present takes on a luxuriant fullness. We are enfolded  
into time...and past, present, and future are integrated once again.

For all the deeply personal strength and encouragement we receive from this Psalm...it offers guidance  
on how we are to shepherd one another:

We are to be witnesses to the Good Shepherd...

To give rest to the weary

Food to the hungry

Drink to the thirsty...

We are to seek out those who have lost their way, who, for whatever reason, feel lost and abandoned...

To do whatever we can to show grace that provides a way back:

We are to come along side and accompany. those who find themselves in a deep and dark valley

To be with them and whatever way we can...to bear witness to the One who abides with them,

to be the visible presence of the invisible God.

With those who live in fear of enmity,

We will do whatever we can to provide a clearing for them

A place of safety and of peace.

I heard this week that one of the prisons in our area houses the one prison hospice in the state of Maine... its where all inmates who are dying come to die. Each week a pastor from Bath travels up here every week to minister to the inmates who are in hospice. Keeping faith with them...shepherding them through the valley of the shadow of death.

In so many ways, that struck me as an embodiment of this Psalm.

A few weeks ago I was talking with someone who is part of a group of volunteers who provides support and assistance to those who are in danger of deportation. Providing food, legal and financial assistance,...and assurance that they are not alone.

That same person wondered if our congregation would be open to serving as an emergency safe house for individuals or families who may need a temporary shelter to avoid deportation. I said I couldn't speak for the congregation...but I said, we would take it up at our next Cabinet meeting.

Here in this place, we anoint and bless...and we become a signpost of the dwelling place of God...a witness to the dwelling place God has prepared.

The world needs a people who know the truth of this prayer....  
A people who have learned to pray this prayer and embody it in their lives...

The world needs a people whose life bears witness to the presence of the Good Shepherd who knows us each by name...who has laid down his life for us. Amen.