

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Of all 150 psalms in the bible, the one most beloved is Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” It supplies words of consolation and confidence.

When you pray it, the opening verses are like what you might say upon waking up in a meadow, looking around, and counting your blessings. The Lord is not my judge, my enemy or a stranger. The Lord is my shepherd. He gives me repose in green pastures. He revives my soul besides restful waters. I don’t lack anything. I just lie here and enjoy blessings from the Lord.

But we don’t lie still for long. The next verses speak of leaving that place of rest: “He guides me along the right path.” The shepherd doesn’t do this so that I receive the glory: he guides me for *his* name’s sake. When I do what the Lord asks me to do, and if my actions bear fruit, glory belongs to the Lord, not to me.

One of those “right paths” is a surprising one: “the valley of the shadow of death.” At this point, when you pray Psalm 23, you stop talking *about* the Lord who is your shepherd, and you start talking *to* the Lord: In that dark valley, “no evil would I fear, for you are with me. Your crook and your staff will give me comfort.” When the Lord is at our side, even the valley of the shadow of death is the right path.

Then, as if walking from that valley up to another peaceful place, you talk again to the Lord, somewhat in wonder at what he is doing: “You have prepared a table before me in the sight of my foes. My head you have anointed with oil; my cup is overflowing.” As in the opening verses, we lack nothing. God has provided sensual enjoyment: food in abundance, fragrant oil on the skin, refreshing drink aplenty—and all of this in the sight of our foes who are helpless to change it.

Then, as if nearing the end of life, for the final verses of the psalm, you look behind at the path you’ve walked and conclude with pleasure, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” The bad days, the shadowy valleys—they existed, but they lose their power over you. You do not remember them: You remember goodness and mercy. Then, after looking back, you look forward: “In the Lord’s own house shall I dwell for length of days unending.”

Consolation and confidence. It’s no wonder this psalm is so popular. Yet we know, that some people lack consolation. Some people lack confidence. They feel alone in the valley of the shadow of death, unsure if the path they walk is the right path. They somehow cannot feel the love God has for them. God is provident. The Lord has a crook and a staff and uses them to defend every soul.

Psalm 23 summarizes our disposition when our soul is at rest. It encourages us when our soul is disturbed.

We sing it on Good Shepherd Sunday when Jesus proclaims himself the kind of leader we celebrate in Psalm 23. He is the gate through which the sheep can come and go and find pasture. Jesus explains why he came: that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

God desires goodness for each of us—abundant goodness. If we ever feel lost, afraid, indecisive, lonely, or hopeless, Psalm 23 reminds us the Lord is near. And not just near. The Lord is our shepherd.

Sunday, April 30, 2023