

Shepherd Sunday

A sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Twenty-third Psalm is among the top five passages of the Bible that most people know. And the question is: Why? There is something about it that speaks to us. The first four verses are a dramatic parable about the shepherd and the sheep and how the Lord is the shepherd who cares for us.

Then there's a separate picture in the last two verses: "Thou preparest a table before me . . . and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Another little parable. It's dramatic. In the Bible there are many places where the Lord is the Great Shepherd: Ezekiel 34, John 10, a couple of places in Jeremiah, and 1 Peter 2:25: "For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls." There is something about the Good Shepherd which says: This is what we need. This is what we want to remember.

1 Peter 5:7: "Cast all your cares on him, because he cares for you." That's the same basic point. Something that helps us; we want that because it says what God is about with us.

In a similar fashion in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:26: "Look at the birds of air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." And 6:28: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin . . ." Then comes the kicker: If the Lord is concerned for the grass and the birds, how much more is he concerned for you and me?! (Matt 6:30)

There is a similar text in Psalm 127:2: "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep." There is an alternate translation: "He gives to his beloved in their sleep." Both are meant here.

One of our favorite hymns is: "What a friend we have in Jesus." "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry Ev 'rything to God in prayer!" What a privilege to bring everything to him because he cares for us.

But what is prayer about? Some time ago in the Reader's Digest there was an article: "Prayer Works." What it really said is that prayer works psychologically. If you have a focus and if you pray about it, prayer works to help you focus yourself, and it works to keep you healthy. At least it seems that way. It's hard to test in the laboratory and the clinic.

Nevertheless, that's not what prayer is about and what we mean when we say: "Cast all your cares on him for he cares for you." He is the Good Shepherd. You are being cared for. We have a lot of mixed-up ideas about this.

The Bible is not fatalistic. We sometimes mistakenly think: "Just take whatever comes; it's all predetermined." Or adopt the false view that from the perspective of eternity, 5,000 years from now, what difference will anything in our lives make?

What is the Lord doing when it says here: "The Lord is my shepherd"? The Hebrew also allows the translation: "He shepherds me." It's active. He is involved in caring for us in every possible way.

We have a problem with how God acts because we want it to go the way we want it to go. We are like a "kid," a baby goat. They go astray and they don't listen, in spite of the fact that John 10:27 states: "My sheep hear my voice and they follow me." That's an idealized picture. They knew very well that life does not work that way. In fact, Isaiah 53:6 states: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." Sheep are opinionated, and they go their own way, and they get in trouble. We're like that. "And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

When we pray, we say: "My kingdom come, my will be done." "Give me this day my daily bread." I know how I want it, and it has to be my way. What has happened to "casting all our cares on him for he cares for us"?

Both John 10:11, 15, 17 and 1 Peter 2:24-25 bring out something more. How does the Lord care for us? The Shepherd gives up his life for us. The Shepherd becomes the sacrifice. "And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

In the New Testament, both in John 10:11 and Hebrews 13:20, the Good Shepherd himself becomes the sacrifice that ends all sacrifice. He gives up his life to give us life, concretely for us in all our difficulties.

Psalms 23:4 states: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me." If you look at the footnote to this verse, it says a literal translation is "deep darkness." The KJV translation is remarkable in translating it: "the valley of the shadow of death" and yet the Hebrew phrase means more than that. The "valley of deep darkness" means not only in death but in whatever trial, whatever darkness, whatever despair, whatever is a problem, he is with us, and he is in charge of it.

Then the picture shifts from that of the shepherd and the sheep to a banquet: The Lord prepares a table, that is, a banquet with the enemies sitting around, and, since the Lord is doing this, you don't have to worry about the enemies. "My cup overflows." It's not only that he gives us something; he gives us something more, something that overflows.

Psalm 23:6: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." ". . . will follow me" is active: "Surely goodness and mercy will pursue me." This verse also repeats in different words the message: "Cast all your cares on him for he cares for you." He cares for us individually, each one of us, because he has made us his own in Baptism. He also continues to do that, and he cares for us forever.

There once was a young shepherd caught in a terrible snow storm, and he didn't survive. They found his body frozen with his right hand grasping the fourth finger of his left hand. Someone asked his family: "What is that about?" He had been taught the Twenty-third Psalm by counting the words out on his fingers: 1 (Thumb) The, 2 Lord, 3 is, 4 **my**, 5 shepherd. The fourth finger is "**my**." In that time of trial and deep darkness, he had remembered: "The Lord is **my** shepherd."

God's care for us is emphasized throughout the Bible. Job 13:15 reads: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" (KJV). Isaiah 64:4: "From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides thee, who works for those who wait for him." In short: Who else has a God like this who works for those who wait for him?

Amen