

Shepherd Sunday

Psalm 23, John 10:22-30

A sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter

The Twenty-Third Psalm is full of promises, and as we read it as New Testament Christians, it says what our hope is all about. (Using the RSV which is strongly influenced by the KJV.)

*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 shall fear no evil
For thou art with me
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies
Thou anointest 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.*

It begins: "The Lord." It's not "Our Lord" or any Lord or some Lord or lordship in general, but "The Lord." In the original Hebrew it's "Yahweh," meaning the one who created heaven and earth, the one who made the covenant, Lord of Lords, King of Kings, he is the Lord.

It reads: "The Lord is my shepherd." That's personal, individual. It reminds us of the preacher's story of a shepherd boy who hadn't much schooling, but he had been taught the first line of the Twenty-Third Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd." He had been taught to count out the words on the fingers of his left hand. The poor boy was caught in a blizzard and didn't make it. When they found him frozen one day after a blizzard, he was hanging on with his right hand to the fourth finger of his left hand. He had died reciting the Twenty-Third Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd."

In the original Hebrew there are two nouns: "Lord" and "my shepherd." The second noun becomes an action. "The Lord shepherds me." That is, God does it. The Lord is the one who is active and directly involved with you and me.

"I shall not want." I shall lack nothing. Then it goes on in the next two verses with four examples: "He makes me lie down in green pastures." You'll recall that the ancient near

East is a desert land, dry and barren. Thus the importance of: “He makes me lie down in green pastures.”

“He leads me beside still waters.” If you look at the footnote, it says: “He leads me besides waters of rest.” It is not only water that is not roaring and could be dangerous, but also that I can rest beside this water.

“He restores my soul.” It’s the King James Version and it means: He restores my life.

“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Again, the footnote points out that “paths of righteousness” means that he leads me on right paths. Finally, “for his name’s sake,” which means he does it to be true to himself. God’s promises are different from ours. They do not fail.

Then comes the difficult verse: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.” There’s a tiny footnote. In the original Hebrew it reads: “Even though I walk through the valley of deep darkness.” Not only death is included but whenever you or I are trapped, depressed, hopeless, or don’t know what to do or where to go – whatever deep darkness comes, thou art with me.

“Thou are with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” And here’s the reason the King James is important; we’ve lost the “thee’s” and “thou’s.” They are in the second person singular, not some general “you,” but the personal Lord: “Thy rod and thy staff.”

Psalm 46, the basis for the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*, begins: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” This is like the Twenty-Third Psalm: “I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).

This shepherd, the Good Shepherd, goes in front of his sheep and leads them. In the ancient Near East shepherds didn’t have sheep dogs. (They had hunting dogs, but not sheep dogs.) The task of the shepherd was to go ahead and lead. He had a staff with a crook so he could lift a sheep out of a crevice. With his rod he could chase away wild animals. And the sheep learned to trust and to follow the shepherd. He goes before them.

There is a double sense to his “going before” us. The tenth chapter of John says three times of the Good Shepherd: “I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11, 15, 17).

How does that happen? Where does that happen?

First of all, he has done this on the cross. Romans 14:9 states: “For this reason Christ died and rose again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.” He has done this and established His Lordship.

Second, he continues now to go before us. In the eighth chapter of Romans, after Paul has summed up the whole of what our faith is all about, he writes: “What shall we say to this?”

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" (Romans 8:31-32)

The answer of course is "Yes."

That recalls the promise in Isaiah 40:31: "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

In the future he is also the Good Shepherd. As Paul writes in Romans 8:37-39: "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That is all very wide sweeping and general and we ask: What about you and me individually?

Isaiah 43:1: "I have called you by name; you are mine."

Ephesians: 1:4: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world."

In Philippians 3:12: "Christ Jesus has made me his own."

This happens when he comes to us and receives us in Baptism. This is why we remember Romans 6:5: "If we have been united with him in a death like his (referring to Baptism), we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (As we note often, the Greek idiom requires the word "certainly.")

We fall apart. We die. In the Large Catechism Luther writes that in Baptism the Lord "snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us his own" in spite of ourselves (LC Baptism 4:83; Tappert 446).

This is said well in the hymn, *Our Hope is Built on Nothing Less*, verse 4: We are "clothed in His righteousness alone."

Salvation doesn't depend on us; it doesn't depend on anything "we are, think, say or do" (Smalcald III/3/36; Tappert 309). It depends on him who never fails and whose promises are always kept.

The picture in Psalm 23 now changes to a banquet, a huge celebration: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows" (Psalm 23:5)

You get the picture of a joyful banquet with darkness all around. The Lord presides. The evil forces are held back. It says: "Thou anointest my head with oil," which is what one did at that time for honored guests.

“My cup overflows” means, as it says in verse 1, that “I shall not want.” I shall lack nothing. Remember the image in Luke 6:38 about what the Lord gives to you: “Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.”

Then in the sixth verse: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

“The house” brings to mind that passage we all know in John 14:1-6: “I go to prepare a place for you; in my father’s house are many rooms (mansions).”
There is a place that he has prepared for us.

Our basic Christian faith is: God in Christ truly became one of us. Truly became human. And he remains human for all eternity so that to be in him means to continue as the truly human beings that we are.

What is that like? Scripture helps sort things out. Paul writes: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

As the King James Version puts it in Ephesians 3:20: “Exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think.”

That means that heaven is more real than this world, not ethereal and unreal and “spiritual.” It is more real. There is life together there, forever. There is meaningful, real life together in him and with each other.

Finally, it says “forever.”

We return to the tenth chapter of John, the Good Shepherd chapter. John 10:27-29 reads: “My sheep hear my voice; I know them; they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they shall not perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all and no is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”

Therefore John 14:27: “Peace I leave unto you; my peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” Amen.