

## **The Lord is My Shepherd**

### Psalm 23

#### A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

“We do not grieve as others do,” writes Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. “We not grieve as others do who have no hope.” Hope is a tentative word by which we mean: Maybe yes, but maybe no. Or: “I hope so,” but it may not come to be because there there’s a lot that could go wrong.

In 1 Peter 1:3, it says: “We have a living hope.” We can then use Psalm 23 to bring out what that “hope” is and the promises that are there.

We read this Psalm as New Testament Christians. In order to be very clear about it, we’re using the RSV which is very dependent and properly so on the KJV over against other translations.

First, we need to understand the setting of this Psalm. There’s a great temptation to read it as a nice, calm picnic on Sunday afternoon in the country. That’s not it at all.

This is a confession of hope and confidence in the Lord in the face of the valley of the shadow and the enemies. This is a confession of the Lord and who he is.

It begins: “The Lord is my shepherd.” It doesn’t say: “A Lord,” or “Some Lord” or “Any Lord,” it says “The Lord,” and the word there is not “God;” it is Lord which is the translation of Yahweh, the covenant God who is Lord of Lords, King of kings, the Lord of all gods. This Lord is my shepherd.

My shepherd. You may remember the story of the shepherd boy who had been taught the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm by counting on his fingers: 1) The 2) Lord 3) is 4) my 5) shepherd. As the story goes, the boy and his flock had been caught in a blizzard. He froze to death. They found him he was holding on to the fourth finger of his hand: “The Lord is MY shepherd.”

In the original Hebrew the first line is simply two nouns: Lord Shepherd. We might be misled then to simply have a kind of equation. It’s important to remember that Hebrew is a verb language, not a noun language. What it means is: The Lord shepherds me. He is active. He is personally active in caring for me.

Long ago there was a popular Christian picture of two children picking flowers on the edge of a cliff, and there hovering behind them is an angel keeping them from falling over. That’s what it means: The Lord shepherds me.

It goes on to say: “I shall not want. I shall lack nothing.”

Then: "He makes me lie down in green pastures." In the Near East then as now, it's a semi-desert. It's really important that the shepherd knows where the oases are, and where those springs and valleys are, there are green pastures.

"He leads me beside still waters." There's a tiny footnote which says this means waters of rest. Not rushing dangerous streams, but waters that run slowly so that there's no danger to the sheep when they go to get a drink. And also, waters of rest are where in the heat of the day they can lie down and rest beside them.

"He restores by soul." That's from the KJV and means: "He restores my life."

It then goes on to say: "He leads me in paths of righteousness." He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. That means he is true to himself. He cannot be false to himself. His promises do not fail. Therefore, his name's sake means he guarantees what this is about.

Then comes in verse 4, the test verse, the trouble: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Again, there's a tiny footnote at "shadow of death." In the original Hebrew it means the valley of deep darkness. That includes all the darkneses, all the troubles, whether you're at the end of your rope, or you're depressed, or lost, or you don't know where to go. Whatever the troubles are, including death itself.

"Because Thou art with me." In Isaiah 43:2-3 there is a striking parallel. "When you pass through waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Therefore, it says: "I will fear no evil because you are with me."

"Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Here is why I am pleased we still have these older words: Thee, thou, thy, and thine, and the like. Because that's the second person singular, the personal. "Thy rod and thy staff, Lord, they comfort me."

We have then in these verses the good shepherd. It's important for us to realize that the shepherd in the New East is different from what we may think of as shepherds. They had dogs but they were hunting dogs, not sheep dogs.

The shepherd then went ahead of the sheep, carrying in one hand the rod which was a weapon to deal with wild animals and other enemies, and in the other hand, the staff with a crook at the end which could rescue a sheep or goat which had fallen into a crevice. The sheep then learned to trust and to follow because they knew the good shepherd would lead them where they needed to go.

The important thing is to realize he goes on before us. He goes before us in three ways. The first way is in terms of what he has done. In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, it says three times: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Paul puts it another way in Romans 14:9: "For this reason Jesus Christ died and rose again that he might be Lord, both of the dead and the living."

He continues in the present to go before us and lead us. In Romans 8:31 it says: "What shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own but gave him up for us all, will he not give us all things with him?"

The answer obviously is: Yes, of course. That's what he does. Having given his own Son, he will hardly hold back in caring for us now.

Then in the future, because we of course think of that at this point, we know, as Paul writes in Romans 8:37-39: "In all these things 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."

All of this may seem sweeping and general religious talk. And you may ask yourself: What about me? What about you and me? Where does it come down?

I will mention some places that speak specifically to that.

First of all, in Isaiah 43:1: "I have called you by name you are mine."

And in Isaiah 49:16 it says: "I have graven you on the palm of my hands." That's a poor translation. It really means: Your name is tattooed on the palms of his hands. So, you are right there, cared for and remembered.

Then in Eph 1:4: ". . . he chose us in him before the foundation of the world."

Philippians 3:12: "I strive to make it my own because he has made me his own."

There is that very specific: He shepherds me.

Where does this happen?

This happens as Paul writes in Romans 6 about Baptism: "If we have been united in death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

As you know, the Greek here requires saying "certainly."

The Large Catechism spells this out: In all our helplessness, lostness, and brokenness, the Lord snatches us (Baptism, 83). In spite of ourselves, outside of ourselves.

We have that in certain hymns, such as “The Rock of Ages” – “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.”

And: “My hope is built on nothing less . . . clothed in his righteousness alone.”

We have that powerfully symbolized by the white covering over the casket at a funeral. Made of pure white wool with the cross so that we are able to visualize: “clothed in his righteousness alone.”

We fail, what we do fails, our lives fail, but his promises never fail because he is true to his own name. He is true to himself. In contrast to our promises, his promises never fail.

Then in the last two verses the picture changes.

It changes from the shepherd to the banquet hall: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” We have to think of this banquet and all around is darkness with enemies hovering, all the powers of deep darkness.

Then it says: “Thou anointed my head with oil.” That was done in ancient times for the guest of honor.

“My cup overflows.” As you recall in the first verse: “I shall lack nothing.”

Or as it says in Luke 6:38: “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.”

Finally, in the last verse: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” In the original what it means is: “only goodness and mercy.” “Mercy” here is that steadfast love, that covenant love that never ends. It shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord.

What house of the Lord do we think of as New Testament Christians? What comes to mind is the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, verse 2, where it says: “I go to prepare a place for you,” a house, a place to abide.

We ask ourselves: What is that like, that future? All kinds of strange things float around about that. What do we have to help us here?

In the first place, Paul writes in 1 Cor 2:9: “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.”

Or Ephesians 3:20: “exceedingly abundantly” beyond all we ask or think. In other words, it blows your mind. It’s beyond all our thinking.

Nevertheless, there is something specific about this, and it goes back to the basic fact of our Christian faith, and that is that the Lord of all became one of us in Jesus Christ,

truly human, and when he died and ascended, he did not then leave his humanity, but he remains truly God and truly human for all eternity.

Those then who are in him continue to be in him and with him, not as becoming gods, but as adopted sons and daughters. And that means to use Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: “born a physical body and but raised a spiritual body.” There is that bodiliness for those who are in him as he is forever. Really more real, real relationship, real meaning, beyond all we can ask or think.

Finally, it says: “Forever.” The last word. That brings us back to the shepherd chapter, John 10, particularly verses 27-29: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never 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 one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

In him, in his hands, there is that which nothing can snatch away.

John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

Amen