

Enemies, Shepherds, and Divine Promises
Psalm 23
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¹*The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,*

³ *he refreshes my soul.*

*He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.*

⁴*Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,^[a]*

*I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

⁵*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.*

*You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

⁶*Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.*

One of the first passages from the Bible that children learn is the 23rd Psalm. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. This Psalm stays with us through adulthood. For many, this is a passage chosen for memorial services. But why this Psalm? What makes it so important to us that we take the time to memorize it, to commit it to memory, and to recite it in times of trouble? While it may not seem so on the surface, this Psalm is revolutionary, anti-capitalist, counter-cultural, and just plain subversive.

As a child learning this passage, I had no idea of the ramifications of this text, much less any deeper meaning than God wants us to be happy and

peaceful, and to not be afraid. This, combined with a few Hail Marys, and an “Our Father” were sure to get me through whatever standardized test, trip to a dark basement, or bad dream was bothering me in my youth. It’s almost become clique in Christian circles to cite this as a favorite scripture, but as is the case with most of our oft-quoted or beloved scripture passages, the actual meaning and purpose can stand in contrast to the general feeling of familiarity and peacefulness it brings up.

Let’s take a look at the passage broken up: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. God is watching out for us, caring for us, looking after us. The word for “shepherd” in this text is also used in Jeremiah 12 and Ezekiel 34 where the king, or “shepherd” fails to carry out the “shepherd” function of his role in protecting and caring for his people. God is then moved to step in as “shepherd.” In the Gospels, this imagery is later used with Jesus as the “good shepherd.” In other words, God is our king and leader, not people assigned to this task, but God. This in itself is a subversive political statement. As for the second part of this verse, many translations say that a better rendering of the text is “I lack for nothing.”

When was the last time you thought about the fact that you lack nothing? In a world that’s clamoring for more things, more money, more power, more status....or maybe on a personal level, more time. More opportunities. More success for you or someone in your family. More of what the media defines as beauty. More friendships. More connection. It’s not wrong to want these things. Some of these things are innate in us, others are in our DNA because we’re told that we should be wanting these things. If you’ve ever bought anything online, and your inbox is like mine, you’re flooded daily with ads, coupons, messages telling you that you need the latest thing. Or it’s so on sale (which is a particular temptation for us Mennonites) that it would be wrong of you NOT to buy it! Everyone around you has it! You are less of a person because you don’t have this and we can fix that for you! Just buy it, because we know you want to!

But our passage calls us to remember that we lack for nothing. What we have is enough. What kind of radical idea is that? It is enough for today. You already have beauty and worth. The connections you already have are valid. What others define as success need not be your definition of success. There is time. There are connections to be had. And the stuff...you don’t need the stuff. Because in the end, are you going to wish that you had more stuff? The Lord is our shepherd, and we lack nothing.

This puts us in a countercultural stance with the messages we receive on a daily basis. If we truly followed this, it's possible that our economy as we have built it would collapse.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He makes me lie down. God is making you rest. Have you been told recently that you need to rest? Would you feel less anxious, less tired, less uptight if you had a chance to truly rest? In our capitalist society, our productivity defines our self-worth. What are you producing? What work are you getting done? What are you contributing? We try to outdo each other with our output. We wear our tiredness like a badge of honor. I know I do. I must be important because of all the things I get to stress about. And we all have that one friend, and God bless that friend because interactions can be difficult, that wants to one-up us on whatever we're doing.

What about people who aren't "productive" in society. What about chronically ill people who need to rest? What about people that are just getting by? People whose goal it is to survive, or to get out of bed, or to make it outside? Are we "outdoing" them? Or are they showing us the importance of slowing down and resting for all of us? God is urging us to rest, God is urging us to allow us to be led not by rapids or some might river, but still waters.

The words for "he leads me" are the same words used in Exodus 15, with the song of Moses. Isaiah 40 uses this verb to mean that God is "leading" people home from exile. The words for "still" or "quiet" waters are used in Numbers. What does all this mean? It seems that the very essence of Psalm 23 is rooted in agitated memories of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings.

He restores my soul. In Robert Alder's translation, it's "He gives me my life back," or "he gives me my life." Are you in tune with yourself enough to know what restores your soul? What does it mean to you to get your life back? Is church something that helps you feel restored? Is it something else? God invites us to let God be a part of restoring our souls. God is wanting to give us our life back. Maybe this is a call to us to give up things that take away life and invest into that which is life-affirming.

Maybe you're feeling as if your life has been taken away in a different sense. Grief, anger, anxiety, indifference, maybe hate. These are all things

that can take away some of your life. Some of us may have had parts of our lives stolen from us. Events and situations, especially ones rooted in trauma can rob us of some of our lives. What this Psalm is calling us to is that God, our Shepherd, not only wants to lead us, but give us our life back. That which has been stolen or robbed from us, limitations that hinder us, or interactions that paralyze us, God wants us to have life and to have it fully.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Again, with Robert Alder's translation, this is "He leads me on pathways of justice for his name's sake." Sometimes we forget that justice and righteousness go hand in hand. "Righteousness" is a rather loaded word for me.

"Righteousness" often rings of "self-righteousness" or "thinking I have all the answers" or "I'm doing everything perfectly." First of all, the Psalmist is telling us we need to be led. We don't "forge paths of righteousness" on our own. For this, we are led. And how would it change our relationship with scripture if we thought about ourselves being led in "pathways of justice?" Not only that, but in God's name. This psalm maybe isn't as peaceful or passive as we originally thought. "Pathways of justice" sounds pretty active. We have 2 calls here, one, calling us to lie down and rest, be led beside still waters." The second call is to act, to enter with God into pathways of justice." Maybe this Psalm is helping us understand the balance of the Christian life.

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. This is where most people who come to the Psalms for comfort land on when they need scriptural reassurance. This is also translated as the "vale of death's shadow" and "I will fear no harm." We are being assured that when we are facing our darkest times, when it seems like all hope is lost, when it's really, really hard to trust, we can fear no harm. This doesn't assure us that we won't be afraid, or feel lost, or have our hearts broken in the process, but no evil will come to us. It is the job of the Shepherd, who is holding the rod and staff, to protect and lead. If anything, this text is telling us "I am with you." Whether you are close to death, in the shadow of death, or in some way feel threatened, we need not fear being ultimately harmed.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. This is difficult. I'm the kind of person who can avoid self reflection enough to think I don't have any enemies. But if I were more honest with myself, I don't need to be in some sort of feudal caste system to have enemies. Could you

enemy be that person you avoid at family gatherings who has a different political view from you? Your boss? Your freinimy? A certain political figure, maybe our president? Someone you work with? Your sibling? The enemy can be someone you know or someone you don't know. And while we try to get along with everyone and avoid conflict as best we can, we all have enemies to some degree, even if we're not comfortable calling them our "enemy." If we search long enough there is someone we don't want to be at a dinner party with. And that is exactly the person with whom God is preparing for you to have dinner. I've often wondered with this Psalm, does this mean I have some sort of transformed relationship with the person? Are we "good" now? Or are they still doing those things that make my life difficult and threaten me? I'm not sure that matters, but my attitude coming to that table certainly matters to God. Are you willing to put your ego aside, let the things they do that make you angry slip by without comment from you? Are you willing to note that God loves them just as much as God loves you? Are you ready to admit that sometimes the children of God are jerks, yourself included, and maybe the grace that's extended to you should be extended to a few other people? Are you ready to admit that maybe you're not that different from your enemy? I try, but I know I'm not quite there yet.

And let us not overlook the role God is playing. God is our Host, offering Divine Hospitality. James Waltner posits that this Psalm may have been used during the sacrificial meal in the temple as a thank you offering. We are honored guests at God's table. This later translated into the life of the early church. This Psalm was used at the Easter Vigil service where people who were newly baptized were anointed with oil, clothed with fresh white garments, and led to the table of the eucharist for the first time. Waltner said, "to eat and drink at someone's table creates a bond of mutual loyalty and is the culminating token of a covenant." This psalm is inviting us to be in covenant with not only God, not only the people we "do church" with, but also our enemies.

My cup overflows. This verse reminds us of our daily need to experience gratitude. Recently I read Diana Butler Bass' book on gratitude called "Grateful." According to Bass, while the current situation in our world seems pretty bleak, gratitude should be a way of life now more than ever. While gratitude may not be able to be practiced "in" every situation, "through" every situation is possible. In spite of what is going on around us, we are thankful. In spite of the state of world affairs, we are grateful. In spite of

knowing that our time on this earth is short, we are thankful. In spite of the Enemy that can hold us down, we give thanks for the spirit of life found in the resurrected Christ.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...Robert Alter's translation of this says goodness and kindness shall pursue me. Commentators focus on this word "pursue." This same word is used in other Psalms when the Psalmist is worried or afraid about their enemies pursuing them. Instead of your enemies following your every move, it will be goodness and kindness.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. There is some debate on the meaning of this. Denise Dombkowski Hopkins says a more faithful translation would be "all the days of my life." While there's nothing wrong with pulling this out into eternity, the focus really is on the rest of one's days. We need not wait until after death or the end of days to dwell in the House of the Lord. Dwelling in God's house, with God as our Divine Host, is something we can trust in the here and now. This is later echoed in the words of Jesus in Matthew, "I am with you always."

We live in a time right now where our enemies are many, our peace is disturbed, covenants have been broken, and the future is uncertain. People who claim to be followers of Christ carry out terrorist attacks, reject the poor and other marginalized persons, and people with nefarious intent claim to be our Shepherd.

I believe this psalm, as well as we think we know it, calls us to a counter-cultural orientation. The Lord our God is shepherd, not world leaders or social figures. We lack nothing. There's nothing we need to buy, no particular person we need to be, nothing noteworthy that we need necessarily do. We're given our life back. That which has been depleted from us in a world of chaos will come back to us. Because we lack nothing, our cup overflows. Not with the spoils and promises of capitalism, but with goodness, kindness, and peacefulness. We are guests and God is our Host, inviting us to a dinner party not with our friends, but our enemies. God invites us into eucharistic covenant with the very people we seek to pull away from. Those people we wish were not in our lives. They are also beloved by God and are hosted by God in this radical act of hospitality. We no longer need to be worried about our enemies pursuing us because we

are told that goodness and kindness will actively pursue us, and we are invited to dwell in God's house for as long as we live.

I invite us this week to live out this Psalm, remembering that we lack nothing. Let us take a posture of gratitude. Let's take the time to commune with those we'd rather avoid. Let us live as if we trust in the fact that peace, and love, and kindness, and goodness are in pursuit of us. And above all, let us live as if our king and shepherd leading us, providing for us, caring for us is none other than almighty God. Amen.