

***God in Space***  
Psalm 23  
Sermon by Mark Schloneger  
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Last week, Richard spoke powerfully about the need for lament.

A lament is a prayer that cries out to God

in the midst of pain, grief, any circumstance that seems out of control.

Lament is our response when we find ourselves in a space, a place

where the right response can only be a desperate cry to God

with feelings of anger, sadness, bitterness, abandonment,

or any other feelings.

The Spirit leads us and intercedes for us in our laments, our groans.

Psalm 39, Richard's text last week, ends with this,

*"Hear my prayer, Lord,*

*listen to my cry for help;*

*do not be deaf to my weeping.*

*I dwell with you as a foreigner,*

*a stranger, as all my ancestors were.*

*Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again*

*before I depart and am no more."*

To be sure, we have things to lament.

The psalm before us this morning – Psalm 23 -- is a very different text,

to say the least .

It's a psalm of confidence, the flip side of lament.

But Psalm 23 is not the answer to Psalm 39 and the desperate words throughout it --

it simply expresses another reality in our walk with God.

Psalm 23 provides us with assurance, with comfort,

but it's power can only be known, I think,

by those who have learned to lament.

God's people hold both of these psalms in our hands

because lament and praise, doubt and confidence, fear and hope

express our reality with God.

Psalm 23. Please read this with me.

*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 right paths*

*for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,*

*I fear no evil;*

*for you are with me;*

*your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint 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  
my whole life long. (Psalm 23, NRSV)*

This was my first Bible, The Children's Living Bible.  
Did any of you either have this Bible as a child or give it to one of your children?  
The pages are colored red on the outside  
and it has pictures of various Bible stories on the inside.

An inside note says that my parents gave me this Bible on September 5, 1975.  
I was five years old.

But the reason why I searched for this Bible this past week  
was to look at the page that comes next.

A page titled, "My important events."  
On that page, there are three notations,  
written at different times,  
by my young, unsteady hand.

You can barely read them.  
I wrote just the facts, in pencil.

Tony died, 1976.  
Cindy died, 1977.  
Jim Jacobs died, 1979.

Tony was a boy in my Sunday School class  
who died in a farm accident when I was six years old.

I don't remember him,  
but I remembered that I wrote his name in my Bible.

Cindy was a teenager in our church who died in a car accident.  
Her sister was also in my Sunday School class.

Jim Jacobs was our next-door neighbor who sat on his patio smoking cigarettes  
while I played imaginary baseball games in our backyard.  
He died of cancer.

For some reason, as a child,  
I felt that my Bible was the place to write these things down,  
under My Important Events.

No one told me to do that, and, many years later,  
I can't exactly remember why I did.

But on the cover of this Bible, my first Bible,  
there is a picture of Jesus,  
walking through rugged mountain terrain,  
carrying a frightened little lamb to safety.

I think it had something to do with that.  
As a child, facing the reality of death,  
    struggling to make sense of it,  
    I must have felt like that lamb, seeking solace, safety.  
And this book was the place to write those things down.

I mention this because I think the reason  
    why Psalm 23 both is taught to young children  
    and is used at funeral services  
    is because of the images that it places in our heads.

In his commentary on the Psalms,  
    Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann,  
    says that it's almost pretentious to comment on Psalm 23,  
    and here I am intending to preach on it.

I understand what he means, though.  
Psalm 23 speaks for itself, through those word pictures  
    that place us in God's presence in simple but powerful ways.  
And so, today, I'd like us just to simply linger with the places, the images, that are described.  
I want us to avoid the temptation to come away with a new angle, a new insight,  
    and to simply find ourselves in those spaces that the psalm describes --  
    those green pastures, beside those still waters,  
    along the valley of death's shadow,  
    before the banquet table, and, finally, in the Lord's own house.<sup>1</sup>

As you find yourself there, pay attention to how this psalm describes God's presence  
    in each of those spaces.

Our God is in space, our space, your space, including the space that we occupy this morning.

*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.*

God the shepherd leads us out of places of chaos, where things seem out of control,  
    and leads us to places of regeneration, revitalization, and restoration.<sup>7</sup>

*As you think about your life, how have you experienced God as leading you, providing  
for you? Where or how do you need regeneration, revitalization, and restoration? How  
about us a congregation?*

For a long time, I didn't know what to make of those words, "*I shall not want.*"  
Whenever I said those words, I always had in mind those in our community, country, and world  
    who lack many things – food, shelter, security, adequate health care, and so on.

But then, I thought about how it is one thing to read this passage  
    as David wrote it – "I shall not want" --  
    and it is quite another to read it to someone else as "You shall not want."

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<sup>1</sup> See Annang Asumang, "The Presence of the Shepherd: A Rhetographic Exegesis of Psalm 23," *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* (March 9, 2010): 1-24.

We are constantly bombarded by messages attempting to place within us  
a sense of need, of lack and then to provide the means to fill it.

For those of us with much, too much, we are reminded that God is our provider,  
and God gives us what we need,

“I shall not want” turns us back to God as our provider and away from our everyday idolatry.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. “Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever  
believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35, NIV).

But, when God brings to mind those who do lack things,

“I shall not want” reminds us that God has provided enough for everyone’s need,  
and that, if we follow God’s leading, the space we occupy will be one of mutual aid and  
generous mercy.

“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.”

‘Truly I tell you,

whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,  
you did for me.’ (Matthew 25:35, 40)

The green pasture, the still waters, are places of God’s abundant provisions – will we follow?

*God leads me in right paths,  
for his name’s sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.*

Immediately the vision of green pastures and the still waters  
is replaced by one that could evoke confusion or fear.

In the Old Testament, the imagery of the valley represents  
a place of gloom, danger or decision making,<sup>2</sup>

This psalm assures us that God protects us and guides us  
in the worst of places and circumstances.

Do you see how God’s presence has changed?

God is depicted as leading the sheep to places of abundance,

God is with or beside the sheep in the valley of the shadow,  
very close at hand, fending off predators and enemies.

Unlike green meadows and the still waters,

this is a temporary space – a walk through, not a place to dwell.

How have you experienced God’s comfort, protection?

In what places in your life are you afraid or uncertain?

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,

and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 11.

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.*

Here, the psalm's imagery shifts.  
The image of a shepherd and sheep in the valley of the shadow  
is now replaced by a banquet table,  
with God lavishly serving a human being  
while his or her enemies powerlessly looking on.  
This is a place of celebration, with tables being laid,  
with cups of wine overflowing,  
with heads being anointed.

Jesus said, "Have the people sit down."  
There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down.  
Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks,  
and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted.  
He did the same with the fish.

God leads, God guides and protects, and here, God hosts, God serves.

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

The house of the Lord is the final image in this psalm.  
Everything the writer had experienced before --  
the abundance, the satisfaction, the fear, the security, the loneliness,  
the confusion, the comfort and the celebration  
are all rolled into worship  
before God in God's house.

And God, God's goodness and mercy, is following, pursuing.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:14-15)

The Lord is our Shepherd,  
We shall not want  
God makes us lie down in green pastures  
God leads us beside still waters  
God restores our souls  
from the never-ending messages that we need to work more, earn more,  
do more, buy more to be filled.  
God guides us in paths of righteousness  
for God's name's sake  
Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death  
Even though we walk through the hospital halls,  
Though we pass through the valleys of depression and delusion  
Though we love people who do not love us the way we need to be loved

Though we stroll along the path of abandonment, isolation, loneliness,  
Though death is close at hand for ourselves and those we love,  
we need not fear evil,  
for you, God, are with us,  
your rod and your staff, they comfort us.

You prepare a table before us  
in the presence of our enemies.

You anoint our heads with oil;  
our cups overflow.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow us  
all the days of our lives

And we will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.  
God in space.

Christ be with us, Christ within us,  
Christ behind us, Christ before us,  
Christ beside us, Christ to win us,  
Christ to comfort and restore us.

O Lord, let it be so for us. Amen.