

I’ve preached on Psalm 23 before and the words are so familiar to us that when it appeared again in today’s lectionary, I decided to offer two different translations so perhaps we’d notice something a little different or go a little deeper into its meaning.

To truly understand the 23rd Psalm, we must transport ourselves to a place and a time when shepherds and sheep were everywhere! In much of the world’s history the work of being a shepherd is as commonplace as being a computer programmer is to us. Every family had at least a small herd of 10-15 sheep. Often the shepherds were teenagers, because who really wants to baby-sit a bunch of sheep all day. But these teenage shepherds were very important. Without them the sheep would not survive. Imagine a young teenager named David spending hours watching his sheep and thinking about God. It would be natural for him to imagine God as a shepherd since his God kept him alive just as he kept his sheep alive.

The translation which I’m using with the slides is done by Robert Alter, a Jewish scholar at UC Berkeley. He begins with the familiar phrase: **“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”** To “not want” doesn’t make much sense to our culture when as soon as we get one thing we want something else. But in our recent economic times, we see a lot of people “in want.” What would it be like to live without want? What would it feel like to be cared for so completely that our every need is satisfied and we want nothing?

**“In grass meadows He makes me lie down...”** The land in Israel is rather like the terrain around us. The months of May through October are very dry. Herds of sheep are constantly on the move searching for green grass. But somehow God the Shepherd knows where the good grass is so that the sheep can stop roaming and settle down to eat. This phrase reminds me of a phrase from the UCC statement of faith: “God seeks in holy love to save us from aimlessness and sin.” Notice that “sin” is not a list of things we’ve done wrong. Sin is missing the mark; being without purpose; living lives of aimlessness. God seeks us out in love to offer us guidance so that we live lives that have purpose and meaning.

**“By quiet waters guides me...”** When the rainy season finally comes, the waters flood the dry land. Running torrents sweep away whatever is in the water’s path, even sheep. We’ve seen what the waters of chaos can do to our world. This metaphor suggest that whatever chaos the waters bring, our spirits need not be washed away for our souls are led to quiet waters running deep. **“My life he brings back.”** Robert Alter suggests that the best meaning for the Hebrew is “life breath” or “life.” We imagine someone who has almost stopped breathing who is revived and brought back to life.

**“He leads me on pathways of justice for His name’s sake.”** The slopes of the hill country in Palestine are crisscrossed with mazes formed from the interlocking trails of sheep and goats. The sheep don’t know which path to take without the shepherd’s lead. On our spiritual journeys, God helps us find our path. And the translator suggests that the pathway God leads us through is the path of justice. And God’s promise is sealed with an oath: **“For his name’s sake.”** If we wanted to convince someone that we would be true to our word, we might seal that promise with words like, “By God, “I’m going to do that if it’s the last thing I do!” But whose name does God use? Who does God swear by? The name above all names, His *own* name. God has sworn to uphold his end of the covenant and God will surely do it. And since Alter emphasizes that the pathways are ways of justice, then we can believe that in spite of the evidence around us, God is moving creation towards a justice that we may not yet perceive.

***“Though I walk in the vale of death’s shadow, I fear no harm; for You are with me.”*** The land of Palestine was carved with limestone walls and between them deep valleys. The walls were marked with caves making for shadowy hiding places for predators. Danger loomed in these shadowy places. Whenever the sheep had to go through the vale of death’s shadow, the shepherd was there to guide. We often fear the dark night of our souls, but even when dark shadows are unavoidable we are not abandoned but led by God, with the shepherd’s protection and presence. Sometimes God’s presence is felt by the arms around us.

***“Your rod and Your staff, it is they that console me.”*** The rod and staff had a twofold purpose: to drive away the enemy and to prod the sheep to move on and stay together. Like sheep, when we are confused, or stuck or paralyzed by our fear, God prods us and brings us to our senses and may even give us a boot from behind so that we start moving forward.

***“You set out a table before me in the face of my foes.”*** Table fellowship was then and is now very important. At our history potluck, the comment was made that, “we do our best work when there’s food around.” The seder meal pictured and the last supper were both meals of remembering Israel’s liberation even in the face of foes. The seder meal is a meal to remember Jewish liberation from Egypt. The last supper is a meal of liberation and of the new covenant that Jesus brings to us in the present.

***“You moisten my head.”*** I learned from Robert Alter that the verb here really doesn’t refer to a sacramental anointing or healing, important as this is, but something sensual and luxuriant making for a happy life. To anoint with oil is to give away precious fat and oil for the comfort of the guest. The preciousness of such a gift means a great deal in a place which is very dry. It would be like giving someone lip balm during a Santa Ana wind. God longs for our lives to be good. ***“My cup overflows.”*** Again, we sense the refreshment of cool water in abundance in a desert land. ***“Let but goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life.”*** While ancient hospitality required a host to let the guest stay for a maximum of three days, God’s seeking us in holy love extends all the days of our life. God pursues us through the joy of children, through the voice of prophets, and through the majesty of creation.

***“And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long days.”*** The Hebrew emphasizes the here-and-now. Though this psalm often brings comfort when we memorialize someone we love, it means we don’t have to wait for heaven to dwell with God. God’s sanctuary is for us in the here and now as well. Especially when life is hard, the words of Psalm 23 bring comfort because somewhere deep down we have this “knowing” that God has not abandoned us anymore than a shepherd would leave his sheep. We all travel through valleys of deep shadows. Sometimes its the valley of depression, of anxiety, of fear, of feelings of inadequacies, of injustice, of loss. But we are not alone. God comes to us like the parent who crawls into bed to comfort the child’s night terror. My kids never wanted to talk about their bad dreams; that’s not what comforted them. It was my presence; it was a comfort that transcended words. It’s the promise of God’s presence that gives us comfort when words don’t help and when nothing erases the pain.

So may God the shepherd, provide you with places of rest, a table of food to sustain you and a cup to quench the thirst of your soul. And when you find yourself in the vale of death’s shadow, may you know courage because the shepherd is your guide. May you respond when God prods you to rise up and do your part. May God chase after you in pursuit every day of your life so that you simply cannot escape God’s tender mercies. And may you find a home in God in which to dwell today and always. AMEN and AMEN.