

Psalm 23
Trusting the Good Shepherd

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The Psalms have long been the prayer and song book of the church. If you want to learn how to pray, open the book of Psalms. Whatever circumstance, thought, or feeling you are experiencing, there is a Psalm, a poem, a song, reflections – a prayer written for you. These psalms have strengthened, comforted, guided, and nourished God’s people for thousands of years.

Prayer is that special way we experience a closeness with God. In the life of the church, prayer is our response to God’s action among us; it is our petitions and pleas; our thanksgiving and praise; our fears and doubts; our confession of sin. There are several Psalms that have particularly guided God’s people through the centuries. There are Psalms that the ancient people of Israel – God’s people – spoke over and over again to breathe comfort, confession, counsel. There are Psalms that the early church in the first and second centuries looked to to make sense of the mystery and meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Saviour. Then there are Psalms that have generated greater importance and significance for the church in later centuries.

Psalm 23 is one of those Psalms. In fact, no Psalm in our current time has been more popularized than this one. Many of us grew up memorizing the Psalm; I know that I certainly did. This Psalm is painted on artwork with images of creeks and rivers; it is passionately sung by choirs and ensembles; it is stitched on throw pillows or quilts; it is a plaque hanging on a wall. But Psalm 23 has not always been so popular. In fact, Psalm 23 has not always been understood or interpreted in the way we today understand it. Most of us today would wholeheartedly agree that Psalm 23 paints an image of our relationship with Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd.

But this has not always been the interpretation of the Psalm. For hundreds of years in fact, it has had a different meaning for the church. You are probably already aware that New Testament writers do not quote this Psalm and so early worshippers probably did not use it to find Christological meaning – which is to say that the early church likely did not directly apply Jesus Christ to the text in the way we do now.

Early church fathers interpreted the Psalm through the lens of the two sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. One of the early church fathers suggests that the verse “he leads me beside still waters” is about baptism; and the verse “you anoint my head with oil” is about the oil used in baptism, confirmation and ordination; and the verse “you prepare a table before me” is about Holy Communion. It appears the early church fathers spiritualized this Psalm. Cyril of Alexandria writes “The table is set for the faithful so that by eating and being strengthened we will be able to face our persecutors at any time. For spiritual food, by encouraging the soul, enables it to resist impure spirits and teachers of errors. But the mystic table, the flesh of our Lord, also makes us strong against passions and demons. For Satan fears those who become pious participants in the mysteries.”

Few other early church fathers and early Christian leaders even wrote about Psalm 23 – showing how much this Psalm lacked in popularity. Overall, the theme that emerges from the early church fathers is the idea of baptism, conversion, and Eucharist. Thus it is quite likely that Psalm 23 was sung during a communion service. The early church did not use Psalm 23 to interpret or help us understand our relationship to Jesus Christ or the Kingdom of God.

It wasn't until the later medieval period that Psalm 23 was understood to be about our relationship with our Lord. The twelfth century Benedictine abbot, Geroch of Reichersberg summarized Psalm 23 this way: "The Lord rules me... he has converted my soul". Though there are still influences of earlier interpretations of Psalm 23 being about baptism and Eucharist, Geroch had different interpretations for the images used in Psalm 23. For example, 'the pastures' are identified as the Holy Scriptures. 'Thy rod' is synonymous with light discipline and the 'staff' is heavy discipline that is needed to remove one's pride. The entire Psalm, according to Geroch, is about the graces or blessings of God upon a Christian's life so that at the end of life there is no fear of death. He outlines about eight different blessings the Christian believer experiences in relationship to God. In his commentary, Geroch explains at length how David, the shepherd boy and King of Israel is actually the shepherd described in Psalm 23. There is a blurring then between the identity of the shepherd as David or Jesus Christ.

Other notable theologians and scholars have identified what parts Psalm 23 refer to. For example, 'pastures' refers not to Scripture but to, and I quote, "the house of the Church militant, in which there are the most healthy sacraments, the divine Scriptures, and diverse virtues." In other words, pastures refers to the church. The interpretation of the Psalm is that it thus expresses gratitude for the gifts of the church to the believer: sound doctrine, the exercise of the sacrament of baptism, and for spiritual direction. For one fifteenth century theologian, this Psalm held deep meaning for the church in terms of the spiritual guidance the church provides to God's people with good leadership: right doctrine and exercise of the proper sacraments.

It is clear that for hundreds of years, this Psalm has had deep spiritual significance or meaning – linked with Baptism, the Eucharist, conversion, eternal life. More than that, throughout history this particular Psalm appears to have been used to bring reform to the church, change to the church, revitalization.

A significant turning point in the interpretation of the Psalm came in the sixteenth century, as the Reformation was beginning. No longer was the Psalm regarded to be about the sacraments or about the church or about King David but is now seen to be about our relationship with Jesus Christ. One theologian describes Psalm 23 as “a Psalm concerning Christ the Lord. In the Spirit the prophet speaks in the person of the Church, the faithful people, and the Elect.”

Martin Luther continues the growing shift away from the allegorical, away from mysticism, and towards the personal. In fact, during Luther’s second course on the Psalms, he acknowledged that there is no other book in the Bible to which he had given so much attention and labour. Not only did Luther strive to provide a commentary on each Psalm but he wanted to make each one personal to himself, he wanted to experience each one. This became his goal: to bridge the gap between the Word and personal lived experience, in other words, he sought to relate the text to human, personal experiences. It is pretty clear that 500 years later, Luther still has great influence on the Protestant church.

This is how Luther describes Psalm 23: “God as the faithful and diligent Shepherd. We learn from this psalm not to despise God’s Word. We should hear and learn it, love and respect it, and join the little flock in which we find it, and on the other hand, flee and avoid those that revile and persecute it.” The dominant themes or images for Luther are the Good shepherd and the gospel message.

Calvin, like Luther, placed a strong emphasis on making the Psalms personal. For Calvin, the psalms are the exemplars of proper prayer, the model of prayer Christians should use because the Psalms reveal the real issues and struggles of the Christian life. It is through the Psalms that faith grows into a new way of looking at the world, a new perception. It is through the Psalms that we interpret human life before God in a way that transforms our hearts and minds. Because of Calvin’s high regard for Psalms, he encouraged churches to sing psalms as public prayers so that others would find encouragement to sing praise to God. In the years following, many psalms were made into melodies. In the English courts, it was popular for evening entertainment to consist of reciting the Psalms. Arguably, it is during this time - the Reformation – that Psalm 23 became popular, developing an interpretation of Jesus as our Good Shepherd, becoming a personalized expression of our relationship with Jesus; rather than about conversion and baptism and Eucharist.

So you have now received a brief history lesson about the different interpretations of Psalm 23. I invite you now to listen to this Psalm again. I want you to pay attention to the word images, to the description of the setting. I want you to use your imaginations to create a visual image of this Psalm. It is my hope that in seeing the Psalm, you'll see another way of thinking about this Psalm; one which tries to integrate the various voices over the centuries. Listen to the words of the Psalmist David, as accurately translated to the original text that I can provide:

I AM is my shepherd, I do not want.

In green pastures he allows me to rest; by choice watering places he leads me.

My vitality he restores; he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk in a dark ravine, I do not fear evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

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

Surely goodness and kindness will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will return to dwell in the house of I AM for endless days.

When I listen to this Psalm, allowing the images to flow freely, I am reminded of an experience two years ago. My cousin and I traveled to Switzerland to go hiking. During our two week stay, we spent four days in a beautiful mountain cabin. It was kind of like a hostel cabin – there were individual bunk beds in rooms that housed 6-8 people, and our hosts provided satisfying and nourishing breakfasts and dinners. We met many other travelers from around the world. Because of my German roots, I was excited when I met a fellow German family and compared notes

about what it's like to live in northern Canada compared to Europe. What my cousin and I didn't expect to meet were shepherds: these are people whose professional, full-time occupations were to shepherd sheep. My cousin and I, both being pastors and appreciating the Biblical imagery of shepherding, were extremely delighted to find out that the hosts had placed the shepherds in our room. My cousin and I each sat on our individual beds and tried to engage the shepherds in English conversation. We were curious: what did they do, what 'tools' did they use, why were they shepherds, was this a common profession, and on and on. Unfortunately, because of language barriers, our conversation didn't get beyond a few grunts. What we pieced together, from conversation with our host, was that these shepherds roamed the hillside with their sheep. They spent long hours in the mountains; they left by 4am to gather their sheep from the fenced-in sheepfold and lead them to grassy areas and shady parts and waters. They carried very little with them, some extra clothes and probably a few tools. It was fascinating to my cousin and I that in the 21st century in Switzerland, there were professional shepherds whose sole purpose in life was to take care of sheep.

In Psalm 23, there are three scenes or settings: in the opening scene, I AM (Yahweh God) is the shepherd. Here we have a description of the relationship of the shepherd to the sheep. Our imagination takes us on a hillside, close to a river, through a deep ravine. The first scene ends in verse 4. In the second scene, verse 5, we find I AM as the host of a huge feast, a banqueting table. We imagine a table full of the best food and drink and there is no end. In the third and final scene, verse 6, we see the psalmist returning to I AM's house where the psalmist will live forever.

Just as the psalmist moves from one scene to another, culminating in this forever scene; so too does the psalmist move from who the song is addressed to. The song begins with an implicit address to the congregation and then moves to an explicit address to Yahweh God. The final climactic verse addresses the congregation once again.

Allow me to take us briefly through these three scenes: the scene of a pasture, the scene of a banquet table, and the scene of a house. As you let the visual cues, the language, the word images absorb into your imagination, I hope you will both see and hear this Psalm as a poetic declaration of trust in I AM.

Right away we know that this is a song of trust. The thesis, the main point, the continual message throughout all three scenes is summed up in the first line: As one who trusts and follows I AM, I do not lack any good thing because of God's goodness and loving-kindness. This means that the relationship is built on trust.

Using three images, the psalmist then describes the goodness we receive: food and rest, guidance, and protection. Now we know that this side of eternity, we live in a world where God's Kingdom is growing but not yet full and complete. It means that often the unrighteous are nourished and protected and wealthy while the righteous suffer hunger and lack of provision.

But this is a song of trust, a song of faith, a song of what is hoped for. It means that through trust and faith, the psalmist interprets the present in light of God's promises, God's blessings, when at last the righteous will no longer suffer. This is the bold declaration of the psalmist; the bold declaration of King David who in his own way as brother, son, and father suffered.

The psalmist tells us why the Good Shepherd provides rest, protection, healing, comfort, and provision for the sheep. The Shepherd does all this for the sake of the Shepherd's name. Names represent personality and reputation. To develop a name is to become famous. The way I AM or Yahweh God creates a name is by faithfulness to keeping his covenant, displaying power on behalf of the nations. To act for his name's sake means that God acts in accordance with his reputation and character, thereby maintaining personal integrity. It is to guide, pardon, spare, deliver.

One's name and one's personhood go together. If someone loses their name (ie their fame), they lose their very existence on earth. Of course God cannot die but God could cease to exist in human awareness. Thus the existence of God on earth in terms of human consciousness or awareness is directly linked to the psalmist's well-being. In this manner, God's interests and His people's interests don't compete against each other but co-exist.

In sum, we are invited to enter the day of the life of the shepherd and his sheep. In the morning, the shepherd leads the sheep to green pastures. Maybe around noon, the shepherd leads them to grassy lands and a gentle creek or river. Re-energized and rested, the sheep can journey back to the sheepfold. The shepherd leads the sheep safely back. If danger appears, the shepherd is ready

to protect the sheep. Should a sheep be injured, the shepherd tends to the sheep, providing healing and comfort.

Then in the second scene we move from the healing and protective sheepfold into the image of a festive banquet. The shepherd has turned into a host while the sheep turns into a guest. A wealthy host generously entertains his guest while opponents of the guest look on helplessly. This emphasizes the themes of provision, restoration and protection that we encountered in the first scene with the shepherd and the sheep.

Better than a sheep in the care of a shepherd is being a guest with a wealthy host whose extravagance and lavish care means that cup and plate are full to overflowing; the host brings refreshment and healing while protecting the guest from their enemies who stand by helplessly. The oil used to anoint the guest literally means 'make fat'. Thus the generous care of the host towards the guest is for the purpose of renewal, joy and healing.

But better than being a sheep in the care of a shepherd or even being a guest at I AM's table is the reality, the promise, the hope of being in I AM's house forever and forever. The attributes of God previously described are summed up in this final verse: goodness and hesed (loving-kindness). In the ancient near East, most gods were described as demanding, hostile, and hideous. In contrast, Yahweh God is described in terms of goodness and loving-kindness; a goodness and loving-kindness which pursues us.

This would be a good way to end the psalm, an appropriate culmination to the psalm's movement of protection and provision. But the Psalmist doesn't stop there. Rather the Psalmist concludes *I will return to dwell in the house of I AM for endless days*. This is the most desired blessing of the psalmist – to dwell with God forever. This is the blessed hope and promise of every Christian believer: to dwell with God forever.

We have the good fortune of listening to the voices of the early church fathers and leaders, the pastors and theologians of the Reformation as we listen to the voice of the Psalmist. As we listen to the Psalmist's voice, we move from a pasture scene to a banquet scene to the house of the Lord. We move from being sheep to being a guest to being part of God's house. This is what it means for I AM to provide, restore, guide, and protect us.

So may this be our church prayer of trust in I AM's provision, protection and restoration. May this be our church prayer these coming months and years as we lean more fully into being a church that is overflowing and becoming. May this be our church prayer over the next months as we prayerfully support the work of our pastoral search committee.