

## “Confident in God” (Psalm 23) – Apr. 30, 2023

### 4th Sunday of Easter

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. 4 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. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 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. (NRSVUE)

A Sunday school teacher asked her students to memorize Psalm 23 and recite it in front of the congregation. A month later, the Sunday school children began reciting the psalm one by one. Waiting, David was very nervous. When it was finally his turn, David said out loud in a trembling: “The Lord is my Shepherd, and that’s all I need to know.” As soon as David’s short reciting was over, the congregation smiled brightly and responded with a loud voice: “Amen!”

Psalm 23 is probably people's favorite and most familiar poem in the Bible. If Psalm 23 were to be summarized in one line, it would be, “The Lord is my Shepherd. That’s all I need to know!” Or “When God is our shepherd, that’s enough!” Psalm 23 also serves as a powerful reminder of our responsibility to care for God’s creation. We are called to mirror God’s abiding love and concern for creation by taking good care of the Earth and its inhabitants. Our actions for stewardship of the world are sometimes called the embodied spirituality of Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 begins with “The Lord is my shepherd!” or “Yahweh is my shepherd” as written in the original Hebrew text.<sup>1</sup> “The Lord is my shepherd” is a confession that, no matter what happens, in good times or in challenging times, God the caring shepherd is present with us and guides us. Just as shepherds tend to and care for their flock, God cares for all creation. “The Lord is my Shepherd” is also a declaration of loyalty to God and of longing to live in God’s reign.

“I shall not want” (or “I don’t need a thing,” depending on translations) is not about “wanting” as a desire for something in the future although it reminds us of the Revelation in which “God’s people will never again hunger; never again thirst... For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd who leads them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their

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<sup>1</sup> Yahweh is the ancient Hebrew name for God, widely used by the ancient Israelites.

eyes.”<sup>2</sup> The Psalmist is still confessing that s/he is content with their present life here and now because of God’s provision and protection at every moment. This confession doesn’t mean that the Psalmist, or you and me, don’t need to work, buy, ask, or visit a doctor. Rather, this is a confession of how we trust God as our shepherd. This is a confession of our reliance on God’s shepherding presence no matter what. God the shepherd is with us all the time.

The Psalmist declares that without God, my needs and desires are meaningless. How often do you say in your prayers, “I trust You, God, who guides my path at every moment”? Like a shepherd, God leads, God provides. God protects, God shelters, God knows where to go, and God saves. As a child of God, the Psalmist confesses God’s shepherding presence, humbly and gratefully pledging loyalty, trust, and commitment to God.<sup>3</sup> “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want!” What a simple and powerful confession of faith!

When we hear Psalm 23, in which the shepherd makes sheep lie down in green pastures and leads them beside still waters and on the right paths, it makes us comforted, calm, and peaceful, being assured that we are OK and safe in God. The Psalmist also expresses gratitude to God, who provides food, water, and shelter to sustain us and keep us out of harm’s way. Not only providing the basic necessities for our physical needs, God also provides our fundamental spiritual necessities, and that’s why the Psalmist confesses that God’s shepherding and guiding presence makes our soul restored and empowered, and keeps us alive. Our culture teaches us to want more and possess more, but the Psalmist invites us to turn toward God, to be rooted in God’s grace, and to trust in God, who is the only real source of life and its blessings.<sup>4</sup> If Psalm 23 were a prayer, it would begin with gratefulness for God’s provision and guiding presence, saying “Thank you God” rather than saying “Please give me more.”

The life of the Psalmist was not always easy and peaceful. The Psalmist seems to know the experience of going through the darkest valley. Just as wolves sometimes attack sheep even when a shepherd is present, Psalm 23 reminds us that even though God is our shepherd, we will experience the “darkest valley” from time to time. The good news is that God is still our shepherd during challenging,

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. 7:15-17 (adapted)

<sup>3</sup> *New Interpreter’s Bible; Interpretation.*

<sup>4</sup> *Texts for Preaching.*

soul-wrenching, and sometimes life-threatening, situations. God the shepherd helps us stand firm in faith and not stumble. How grateful we are that God comforts and gives us strength when we don't know what to do in the midst of the darkest valley!

When I preach Psalm 23, I sometimes quote Harold S. Kushner, a Jewish rabbi, who lost his 14-year-old son, Aaron. Aaron had suffered from a rare aging disease since he was 3 years old. In his book titled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Kushner said, "God's role is not to protect us from pain and loss, but to protect us from letting pain and loss define our lives." According to Kushner, Psalm 23 doesn't ask us to renounce everything or to long for nothing more. Rather than extinguishing our desires, Psalm 23 poetically invites us to see God's loving presence in every moment of our lives, especially during our darkest moments, expressing how good and faithful God the shepherd is. Our role is to hold God's hands tight as we find our way out of the valley with prayers and trust in God, who alleviates our fear. I hope Kushner's invitation still echoes to us, reminding us of the need for constant conversation with God through prayer.

Then, eventually, God the shepherd will welcome us into the house of the Lord, inviting us to the grace-filled and generous table of God. Imagine the scene of a communal celebration of God's people before God, the welcoming and gracious host. The Psalmist invites us to rest in the confidence of God's never-failing and ever-present love and grace. Psalm 23 concludes by proclaiming, "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."

Do you know what happens if we divide the word NOWHERE into two between the W and the H. Can you guess? It becomes NOW HERE.

Sometimes we feel that God is NOWHERE, especially when we deal with challenges and threats with fear and anxiety. What is amazing is that whenever we notice God's presence, NOWHERE becomes NOW HERE. The Psalmist confesses that God is NOW HERE even when s/he walks through the darkest valley. Let me paraphrase the rest of the psalm: "Even when I walk through the darkest valley, even when I feel that God is nowhere, I believe God is NOW HERE. I'm not afraid, because God walks by my side. God's rod and staff comfort me and make me secure. God is NOW HERE, preparing a table before me right in front of my enemies. I am confident that God is NOW HERE, anointing my head

with oil; my cup overflows. God's goodness and mercy shall follow every day of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.<sup>5</sup>

I invite you to remember that God is NOW HERE all the time, no matter what. How grateful that God is with us NOW HERE. Always.

This morning, I invite you to extend your hands to each other, saying, "God is NOW HERE. God bless you!" I am going to add one more thing. I invite you to hold your body or your face with your hands, saying "God is NOW HERE. God bless me and God loves me." We are confident in God because we are God's beloved.

"The Lord is my Shepherd. That's all I need to know and that's enough!" God the shepherd, who is now here, bless all of you. Amen!

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired by Rev. Barbara Lemmel.