

Psalm 23

In light of the Covid – 19 virus pandemic, our anxiety is likely much higher. I would like to suggest a daily dosage of Psalm 23, a prescription that will hopefully keep us from being consumed by the dis-ease of worry and fear. This was originally meant for our Midweek Lenten services, but since our lives have been greatly disrupted by the virus, I would like to share these thoughts with you. May I suggest that you use it as a Bible Study or a daily devotional.

Like all psalms, Psalm 23 was used in **worship** by the ancient Hebrews. The writer describes God as his shepherd, in the role of protector and provider. The psalm is read, recited and sung by Jews and Christians. It has been called the best known of the psalms for its universal theme of **trust** in God. Others claim that it is one of the finest literary writings of all time!

There are five types of psalms the Book of Psalms:

- a. Royal
- b. Communal lament
- c. Individual lament
- d. Thanksgiving
- e. Praise

Note: when a Jewish person dies, the family and friends will recite Psalms until the body is buried within 24 hours. When I lead a funeral service, I often use the 23rd Psalm because of the comfort it lends.

1. ***The Lord is my shepherd.***

This psalm is attributed to David, a shepherd who disposed of a rather large, pesky Philistine named Goliath, and later became the greatest king of Israel. Shepherding has not changed much over the centuries, making it an easy metaphor for even us modern urbanites to understand.

The **job description** for the shepherds goes like this:

- a. Watch for danger. Wild animals and bad people were the enemies of the sheep – and therefore need protection from both of them.
- b. Lead (often from behind) the flock to new sources of food and water.
- c. Community is a safer place than being isolated or lost. The shepherd wants the sheep to stay together, and not to nibble their way into lostness. Or as our synod motto says about church, “*We are better together*”.

I shall not be in want.

The mentality behind the psalmist words is completely opposed to the Madison Avenue propaganda where we are constantly being told that we have many needs, all of which can be met by buying some new (or old)

product. We need “sex appeal” so we must buy a new toothpaste, a new kind of mouthwash and a new brand of soap. We need self-confidence and a better self-image, therefore we must wear stylish clothing determined by the garment industry. Our whole mode of thinking is “want-centered.” David tells us that to have God as our shepherd is indeed to have everything we want. He, who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-caring, is enough; He is sufficient. With Him we need nothing else.

People in other countries often have less than we Americans have, sometimes to a great extent. And yet they often seem content, more content than even I often feel. *“The more you have, it seems that the more you want”*. Lent – if we allow God to enter our lives yet again - calls us to simplify our lives. We are such control freaks until something happens beyond ourselves – like sickness (or worse, a pandemic). Then we realize the reality of life itself – that some things are beyond our control.

This **Coronavirus** scares us because it is beyond our control. Fear grips us and we wonder what to do – even as we come to the realization that there is little we affect. It is so unsettling.

When we visit a poorer country, like **Mexico**, I pack clothes that I seldom wear and leave them. It’s not a huge thing, but I hope that the maids and their families can get some use out of them,

Which reminds me: I have lived a privileged life, because I have really never physically been in want. But I have been in want emotionally and spiritually. Sometimes – most of the time – these are bigger issues as we seek to live out our lives.

I listen to KOA on the radio in the mornings, and they often have retirement planning commercials. *“How much will we need for retirement?”* Now I am all for financial security, but stoking the fear of inadequacies seems to be what our society is all about. There is no real security – except (in my opinion) when we are living lives where we are helping out others as God has empowered us to do

I read Richard Rohr’s emailed devotions (Meditations@cac.org) every morning – trying to frame my day more with the contentment of God and less on the complexities of daily living.

2. ***He makes me lie down in green pastures.***

Notice that the Psalm is written from the sheep’s perspective – not the shepherds.

Who doesn’t like a chance to chill out – to lie down and relax. This is esp. true when we know we are safe.

My wife she says she sleeps better when I am around – because she feels more secure. Part of Lent is to allow God to make us slow down and feel the presence of the good shepherd.

And green pastures – lush, cool, well-watered grasses. Sounds like spring - time. Green grasses describe a place of peace and contentment.

Realtors – location, location, location.

My question to you is this: “*Where is your place of green grasses? Where do you find contentment? Where do you feel the most at ease?*”

He leads me beside quiet water.

We have had turbulent times in our lives – in fact, most of us are there right now. To have a chance to be near waters that are quiet is an invitation for a peace that eludes us on a daily basis.

Water – in the context of the Middle East – is, as you know, rare. Pools of quiet waters are even less frequent. Once again, there is something serene about waters that are quiet and maybe even contemplative.

Together, green pastures and quiet waters would equate to paradise.

But paradise is quite different in the three Abrahamic world’s faiths.

- a. The Jews word for Paradise is “pardes” and is actually a borrowed word from the Persian word that means “park” or “garden” and in some Rabbinical circles is thought of as Eden restored.
- b. Islam views **paradise** as a pleasure garden in which the blessed experience the greatest sensual and spiritual happiness.
(FYI - Have you heard of the 72 virgins in Islamic paradise? The word is “Houri” for the very attractive women of Islamic paradise. Ironically enough, there is where the West countries several hundred years ago developed the word for “whore”).
- c. In **Christianity**, **paradise** is pictured as a place of rest and refreshment in which the righteous enjoy the glorious presence of God.

Note: all three describe a place where there is the absence of sorrow, suffering and sin.

Jesus told the thief on the cross “***Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise***” (Luke 23:43) That sort of spiritual intimacy with God is what I think we all crave, and why the 23rd Psalm speaks to us in such a meaningful way.

3. He restores my soul.

It must have been in the last 1990’s when I learned maybe one of the most important things in life. At least, when it comes to computers and appliances that have computer chips within them. What was that great discovery?

Turning it off and then back on. **Reboot**.

Jesus wants to restore or “reboot” our souls, to take us back to the manufacture’s original settings and standards. We see that place in the Bible as the Garden of Eden.

Woodstock – Joni Mitchell’s song (one of my favorite Canadian musicians) about the festival of the same name – talks about “*going back to the garden*”. The Bible begins with story of perfection that quickly becomes corrupt because of human ego issues – you know, like Adam and Eve wanting to be like God. And yet we all yearn to return to a place govern by God’s original settings, a place of contentment and peace and beauty.

And what about “soul”? We are so hung up about our minds, about knowledge and facts and sometimes useless information, that we forget that there is more to us than what we know. That is why we talk about soul.

Years ago, part of my training to be a pastor included observing firsthand human autopsies. I have seen most of what is inside of us, and was amazed at the bright color of some of our internal organs. I have seen brains sliced and diced to see if there were any problems or sickness there. But you know what I did not see? A soul. I think I know why.

I think of a soul as an empty place especially made by God for God. But too often, we fill it with something else. We fill it with ego, addictions, inappropriate sex or porn, and others. This may work for the short term but usually leads to significance problems down the road. Because we are designed to be God’s people – all of us – we all have souls – a place made by God for God.

The psalmist reminds us that God wants to de-clutter and empty our souls so that God can be apart of us again. God wants to restore and reboot our souls, so that God can once again be part of our daily lives.

Lent is a time to let God restore our souls. I pray that restoration work goes well for each of us. I hope that even the daily reading of Psalm 23 can lessen our anxiety and draw us closer to God.

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Our family attended the **1968 World’s Fair in Montreal**. We stayed at a prefab hotel that was put up in a field many miles outside of Montreal – and was to be taken down after the event. So it had no address the could be looked up in the phone book. We stayed late one day at the World’s Fair – and got a taxi to go back to the hotel. Two problems:

- a. None of us spoke French
- b. Lack of address for hotel

I told my family that I could direct and guide our driver back. They knew I could, because I have always had an incredible sense of direction. Several highways later – we drove directly up to our prefab hotel.

My wife can come out of a building and turn the opposite direction she should be going more than 50% of the time. The more she focuses on going the right direction, the more she proves she cannot do it. I have been her guide through much of life, at least when it comes to going different places, especially in other countries. She loves living in the front-range because it helps her get around.

Guides. When we travel, it is so important to have good guides. They can make the trip so meaningful and special when they give good and appropriate guidance. This is how **Rick Steves** has made a dollar or two in his life.

We took our kids to Europe about 20 years ago. We read and followed his guide books for restaurants and small hotels. With his insight, experience, and guidance, it was one of the most remarkable trips we have ever taken. Stayed at great little hotels and had fabulous food in restaurants we can have easily overlooked or not known about.

Likewise, God wants to be our guide, to guide us on the right paths. Being on the right path helps us to get where we should be going. God wants us to reach our potentials, but to do so means being guided on the proper pathways.

Example: driving through the Balkans. When we visited Belgrade, Serbia, there were no or few street signs. We weren't lost, but we had problems finding our ways around on one-way streets with significant potholes to avoid. However, all of the bridges over the Danube were new. Why? NATO bombed them in 1999 to get the Serbs out of Kosovo, where they were killing the Muslims that lived there. This was the worst ethnic cleansing in Europe since the Holocaust.

“For his name’s sake”. What does that mean?

- a. Names have power, and in the honor/shame culture of the Middle East, your name was incredibly important.”
- b. The name “Jesus” means “the one who saves”.
- c. Somebody’s name is tied to somebody’s reputation. Jesus endorses/co-signs our lives with his own name.

We take on Jesus’ name when we are “Christians”. What was started by the pagan Romans likely as a derogatory label aimed at the followers of Jesus is the name we aspire to be like. We want to be like Jesus the Christ, the Good Shepherd, who looks after others.

Story: Several years ago, we were on Trail Ridge road in RMNP. We were just above the tree line and were looking for marmots. The clouds were low and rolling in - so it was like driving and walking in pretty intense fog. I walked down a bit and soon discovered, not a marmot, but a vintage Ford Mustang. I went over to it, and discovered it had three blown tires but was empty. We contacted the Park Service and stayed there until they brought in a wrecker with a very long rope to pull it back to the roadway.

You see, paths and roads are good, but only if you use them. Once we get lost or end up off the paths, then we have problems. Jesus wants to guide us along right pathways for his name's sake. Staying on the path and close to the Good Shepherd means we have a better chance of navigating this life as we encounter it's many nuances.

This Lent, as we use Psalm 23 for guidance, we might ask ourselves:

- "How are we allowing God to guide our life right now?"
- "Are we coasting through life, or are we seeking a more meaningful life?"
- "Are we distracted by foggy conditions that quickly put us at risk?"

In these days of uncertainty on many fronts, it is Jesus the Good Shepherd who wants us to know that He journeys with us.

4. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

We humans know a thing or two about fear. We are currently living in a time filled with heightened fear and anxiety.

However, "valley of the shadow of death" is possibly not the most accurate translation of the original Hebrew text. The [NIV, NLT, and HCBS](#) translate the phrase as "darkest valley," resulting in [Psalm 23:4](#) reading as, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley . . ." The Hebrew word for "shadow of death" is *sal-ma-wet*, which means "darkness" or "dark shadows." It contains the same root as the Hebrew word for "death" (*ma-wet*), so it is easy to see why some Bible translators include the mention of death in [Psalm 23:4](#).

Sheep do not understand the concept of death. They do understand, though, that entering a dark valley can be dangerous. The point of [Psalm 23:4](#) is that, even when we might have reason to be afraid, we do not need to fear, because God is with us, and He will take care of us. He, like a shepherd, knows what He is doing and has our best interests in mind.

So, it does not appear that "valley of the shadow of death" is the most accurate translation in [Psalm 23:4](#). A "dark valley" connects much better with sheep lying down in green pastures and beside quiet waters. However, the main point of [Psalm 23:4](#) still definitely applies to death. Many people [fear death](#), and those facing death certainly feel as if they are in a "dark valley."

But even in death we do not need to fear, for God is with us, and God will protect and comfort us through it all.

I will fear no evil, for you are with me;

Who are those who protect us? Who are those who keep us from fearing what may or may not happen?

Fear – “False Evidence Appearing Real”

“Fear has two meanings: ‘Forget Everything And Run’ or ‘Face Everything And Rise.’ The choice is yours.”

— **Zig Ziglar**

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”

— **Nelson Mandela**

“It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live.”

— **Marcus Aurelius**

“Never be afraid to try something new. Remember, amateurs built the ark, professionals built the Titanic.”

— **Unknown**

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” — **Franklin D. Roosevelt**

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

The Staff

The staff the psalmist refers to can have several meanings depending on how it’s used. In Old Testament times, the staff could be a scepter, walking stick, crutch, or some kind of support or prop. For Psalm 23, the staff is two different things.

A Staff Gives Rest. Psalm 23 starts right off with equating the Lord with a shepherd (“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”). So, we know immediately we’re talking about shepherding tools. A shepherd might use a staff as something to lean on in case the ground is not dry or safe for sitting or for support when he needed rest during long shifts tending the sheep. For us today, the staff serves as a symbol that we too can find rest when we lean on the Lord. When we lean into Him, He’ll lean into us. He is both the shepherd and the staff supplying all the rest we need when we lean on Him.

The Staff is a Guide. The staff was also used to guide sheep across open fields and along rocky hillsides. It was a handy tool for making sure they stay on track. Though the shepherd might need to leave the 99 to find the one, I would bet he would rather keep the flock together.

One of the more interesting use of the staff was at nighttime. The sheep were often put into stone enclosures, with the walls about three feet high (one can see these all around Bethlehem). The shepherd would sleep at the opening, with his staff propped up as a “trip line” across the opening. If an animal tried to get in, or a sheep tried to get out, the shepherd would feel the staff move and be notified that way.



The Rod

The rod is perhaps one of the most misinterpreted words in the entire Bible. It is often used by many parents to justify their use of spanking. That’s a topic for another time but let me point out that is not what God meant by “rod.” It is not a tool for correction or discipline; it’s a tool of protection and a symbol of love. Here’s how.

The Rod is Our Protection. Most of us picture a rod to be a long, hard stick of some material. For a shepherd, the rod isn’t a long stick but rather the curly end of the staff. The rod was used to pull sheep out of dangerous or unfortunate situations such as if a sheep was caught in thick brush or had fallen into deep water.

The rod was also used to defend the sheep against predators. Since sheep aren’t very smart, it was up to the shepherd to adequately defend his flock, so a nice long staff with a thick, curly rod on the end made for a solid weapon against any enemies. In this way, the rod is a symbol of God’s protection.

As a Symbol of Love. Apparently, most shepherds used their rods as a means of counting their sheep.

In Leviticus 27:32, a rod was used by the priests to count the tithe. Shepherds used this same methodology to count their flock. The shepherd would hold out the rod end of the staff and have all the sheep pass under it one at a time, counting each animal as it passed. Keeping count was mighty important since they were traveling the countryside so much. If you’ve ever chaperoned a school field trip, you know what I mean. It’s super important to make sure you leave with as many as you brought.

The staff and the rod are a part of the same tool, both working together in God’s gentle hands to remind us of God’s everlasting faithfulness and love. As children of God, we can take a deep breath knowing God is always with us, always protecting us, always guiding us, and always offering us a place of peace and rest.

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

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”. This psalm is one that focuses on the abundance of God – here, with a banquet table being prepared.

The sheep can eat in peace even with the presence of enemies, because the Good Shepherd is there and will protect the sheep.

This is what Jesus is doing in the Last Supper. He told them that they were to do this in remembrance of him. It is designed to remind us of his victory over evil. The Supper of the Lord was to seal his relationship with his disciples. He was going to fight a battle on the Cross so that we might be protected from our enemies. Jesus said that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Paul said that Jesus *"disarmed the spiritual powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."*(Colossians 2:15)

The Good Shepherd has done everything that is needed to protect us from our enemies. He has disarmed them, and defeated them on the Cross. We can feast at his Table and celebrate our deliverance. When the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, is celebrated, the kingdom of God is advanced, and the kingdom of darkness is diminished.

You anoint my head with oil;

Only kings and priests were anointed with oil, so this is full of symbolism. Anointing oil also signifies gladness. We are reminded of this in Isaiah 61:1-3. Who brings good news to the poor? Who binds up the brokenhearted, proclaims liberty to the captives, giving “the oil of gladness instead of mourning”? Surely this is the Anointed One, the Lord Jesus.

Note: An attack by the blowfly is a real concern to a shepherd. The fly lays its eggs on the sheep, and within twenty-four hours, the larvae penetrate the skin and multiply, and soon the sheep is poisoned. Thankfully, there is a treatment: “back lining”. An appropriate ointment is poured on the animal’s head and along its back, and it will keep the blowflies away.

My cup overflows.

Abundance is once again the theme of the psalm.

The Bible emphasizes the excessive love, blessing, and power that God desires to pour out on those who love Him (Malachi 3:10; Lamentations 3:22; Psalm 108:4). Jesus reflected God’s generosity when He said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Paul continues that theme in Ephesians

[3:20](#) and describes God as the One “who is able to do [immeasurably more](#) than all we ask or imagine.” [Romans 8:37](#) promises that we are “more than conquerors through Him who loves us.” The message echoed in each passage is that of God’s excessive grace and provision for every area of our lives. We can bear everlasting fruit for God’s kingdom, and we can overcome impossible challenges when the Holy Spirit fills our hearts until our “cup overflows.”

- 6. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,** Dwight L. Moody, a noted evangelist of the nineteenth century, was once approached by a woman who needed counseling. Two men, she claimed, were following her. Whenever she stepped onto the city trolley, they stepped onto it behind her. When she stepped off, they stepped off. With a nervous twitch in her neck, she insisted that she had even been followed to his office by these very two men.

Moody could easily detect that this precious woman was suffering from a mental delusion. There was no one following her. But to put her at ease, he told her: “Those two men following you are David’s men. Their names are Goodness and Mercy.” He turned in the Bible to Psalm 23:6 and showed her, “Surely goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life.” She was relieved and exclaimed: “That is wonderful. I have always wondered what their names are.” The woman left that day with peace of mind, comforted to know that it was goodness and mercy that were following her.

As believers in Jesus Christ, you and I need to be also trusting that the goodness and mercy of God are following our every step. That is especially important during the days of the Corona virus. We need to be similarly confident and comforted, believing that every day of our lives, these two friends of David are with us for every step of life’s journey.

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The psalms of David are filled with a longing to abide in God’s presence, within His house. In [Psalm 26:8](#), David declares, “O LORD, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells.” In the following psalm, David professes this yearning to be the singular drive of his heart, saying, “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple” (27:4). Another psalm expresses the same desire no less ardently: “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God,” and pronounces, “Blessed are those who dwell in your house” (84:1–2, 4). Such longing for life with God in the house of God concludes what is perhaps the most well-known

and beloved psalm: “And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (23:6).

Like the returning Prodigal Son held in a prolonged embrace by his panting father, so our journey’s end and eternity’s beginning are really a coming home—and even God’s house is lacking until all His children come home. Led by the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, who laid down His life for His sheep, God’s people will indeed enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise.