

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely 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. (See also John 9)

In September of 1973, while traveling through Colorado's Red Mountain Pass on a glorious fall morning, I saw a shepherd working to keep a flock of sheep together. I watched him, his horse, and his dog, work flawlessly as a team to keep these skittish creatures from wandering off.

It helps to know how sheep think. A typical sheep, standing in a field of perfectly green grass, inevitably says to him or herself: "I think I want *that* grass, over *there*." And on the way, they will conclude: "No—I think I like that *other* spot better..." And if you're any nearby sheep, you will, of course, be thinking: "I think I'll follow him."

Seeing this endlessly wandering flock, my first thought was, "That shepherd's really smart, to keep them together so well." My second thought was, "Those sheep—not so much."

That's the back story for this, the most beloved of all the psalms, the iconic Bible passage to sacred and secular readers alike. It is a powerful text, and its author had no idea how universal would be its reach. Among oppressed people around the world, it's often been a political tract: "Because you who tyrannize us are cruel, unreliable, and unworthy, the Lord is *our* shepherd."

There's no typical "Praise the Lord" beginning, as in many psalms; instead, it begins in quiet reflection. It's very personal, almost like an autobiography, as the author takes us on a virtual journey, beginning with "*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*" We're taught to "want". Asking our ancestors what they needed to survive would likely result in a shorter list than ours; we have more "essentials". *My* survival kit would include a cell phone and GPS (so I could find my way as quickly as possible back to where I *didn't* need to worry about surviving.)

But the writer doesn't say that he never "wants". Perhaps the best translation is: "I have everything that I need." (Which challenges us to be honest about what we *think* we need.)

He describes God as a shepherd who leads the flock by "*green pastures*" and "*still waters*" and on "*right paths.*" But then he adds: "*God restores my soul.*" To talk about one's soul is to talk about our whole self: God, he says, sustains me in every way; my God is not a taker; God is a giver, a restorer, one who refreshes me.

He continues the journey, and we—being sheep of course—follow. But suddenly, we find ourselves in a "*dark valley,*" where we might feel lost and frightened. In this morning's reading in the ninth chapter of John's Gospel, we meet a man whose whole life had been a dark valley; born blind, he lived a life devoid of sight, hope, and respect. Life can be like that.

So what does God do, when our path leads us here? Just as suddenly as the psalmist realizes where he is, he exclaims: "***You are with me!***" The writer doesn't labor to explain it. He

can't. He is caught up in amazement. Four words, at the very center of this carefully-crafted psalm. To the psalmist, this is the heart of the matter, and we dare not let this slip by unnoticed. Rituals, rules, doctrines, even serving and doing good, can miss the central reality of our hope, which is this: *Whatever else we may be, we are a companioned people.*

Let nothing distract us from the foundation of who we are, and Whose we are. If we look directly into a sun-lit window, without moving our eyes for a minute... when you look anywhere else, that image clouds everything else in the room. While he goes on to talk about “*rod...staff...table...oil*” those things pale, when compared to “*you are with me.*” It's a game-changer.

Dissect these words any way you like: “You are with me...You are with me... You are with me...You are with me.” The result is the same: God walks with us through every moment of life. I confess I find it strange that God can be with me—when I am so seldom consciously with God, so distracted, frantic, preoccupied, so unaware. I am rightfully embarrassed by that: I am such a sheep! Yet: “*You are with me.*” It is amazing; imagine how patient God must be to walk with *us!*

Jesus, encountering the formerly-blind man, says: “You have now *seen*” the one whom God sent to be with you.

Of all people, we in this church should see the connection. Because this One who stood before the man born blind is the One of whom the angel spoke, telling Joseph that his son would be called “‘Emanuel’, which means—“God with us.”

By the way, notice that once this psalm's author realized that God was with him, he stops talking to us. We take a back seat now, as we watch a holy love affair between the Shepherd and a fragile but grateful lamb. There *are* times when a soul is captivated by its Shepherd, and it's best for us to simply watch...and learn, as the psalmist piles on image after image: “*Your rod...staff...a table...anoint...*” and then, he must be nearly shouting the climax of the psalm: “*my cup overflows!*”

Finally, the writer notices that we're still there, because we've been captivated by what we're seeing. There's more he could say, but mere words can add little to the journey now. So he ends with a simple affirmation: “*Surely goodness and mercy will follow me...*” In “*mercy*” we see again what we saw two weeks ago in Psalm 122: that beautiful Hebrew word *hesed*: “steadfast love”, which is what “*You are with me*” is all about. And “*follow*”—I have never looked closely at “*follow*” before. Literally, it means “pursue”. In the Psalms, it usually describes an enemy in hot pursuit, but here, it's God—the God of goodness and *hesed* “steadfast love” who relentlessly pursues us, and will until the end of our journey. God pursues us like Jesus, who “pursued” the blind man who was harassed and rejected (and all who like him are cast aside), and invites them into friendship.

I love this promise of God-with-us; it needs no caveats, no qualifiers, no exceptions. As God is with me, God is with you; as God is with you, God is with us...and God is with *them*, whoever “they” are as well. And God-with-us is never passive; our God is no spectator, but a Savior, a Guide, a Shepherd, our Companion.

And if God is with us, then all we do is powerful, and every moment is holy, and

pregnant with eternity. If God is with us, then we are never a minority. If God is with us, then we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

And if God is with us, then, yes: we have everything that we need.

And remember, people of Emanuel United Church of Christ: this promise is our very name.