

May 3, 2020
Year A
Psalm 23

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

A Psalm for the Living, a Psalm for Today

King David was a shepherd. That's how he started his life. Tending to his father, Jesse's, flocks on the hills around Bethlehem. He had to be called in from the flock to be introduced to Samuel, who was told to anoint David as king, for he was God's chosen one. He had to be called in from the flock when King Saul needed a musician to come and soothe his troubled spirit. When he defeated Goliath, the giant of the Philistines, he had to find someone else to take care of the flock before he went into battle. The weapon that he used in that fight was a shepherd's weapon, a sling and five smooth stones.

David is known for being a shepherd, a musician, a warrior, a king, a man with profound faith, a man with a troubled family life, and a man who made good choices and bad choices. Today we are reminded that David is also known for being a poet.

Today's Psalm probably the most well-known Psalm of all of the 150 Psalms, the Twenty-third Psalm, is attributed to him. In the Bible it says, "Psalm 23 *A Psalm of David*". That attribution *A Psalm of David* is not a scholarly note, added by modern people. It is part of the Hebrew text itself.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, our gospel reading comes from the tenth chapter of John's gospel. In that chapter, Jesus describes himself as "the gate for the sheep" and as "the good shepherd". And, every year, on Good Shepherd Sunday, when we remember that Jesus describes his relationship with the world in terms of sheep and flocks, and the things that protect sheep and flocks, gates and shepherds, the Psalm that we have assigned is Psalm 23; a Psalm written by a shepherd and a Psalm that emphasizes that God is indeed a good shepherd.

Every Wednesday, during this time, when so many of our normal church activities are not happening, we have created an opportunity to gather together as

a community on Zoom to check in with each other, to meditate on scripture together, and to pray together. During our time when we are reflecting on scripture, I have us focus on a scripture reading that is coming up on Sunday, so that we are more connected with the text when we gather for worship. This week the scripture passage that we reflected on was the twenty-third Psalm, our Psalm for today. One thing that many of those who gathered observed about Psalm 23 was that it was the Psalm that was read at a loved one's funeral.

Psalm 23 is, by far, the most common Psalm that is chosen for funerals. In fact, in spite of the fact that over the course of my career, I've probably presided at 50 or more funerals, I could probably count on one hand the number of times Psalm 23 has not been the chosen Psalm for the service.

Somehow, as a community of faith, not just for Lutherans, but across denominations, we have decided that those words, of a shepherd, and about a shepherd, are among the most comforting words that we could hear during a time of grief.

Maybe, when we hear them, we hear them as words spoken to us by the beloved one who has died.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

Maybe, when we hear these words, we imagine, we hope, we trust that with those words our beloved one is telling us that he or she is fine, safe, provided for, never in need again.

**The LORD makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters.**

Maybe, when we hear these words, we imagine, we hope, we trust that with those words our beloved one is telling us that he or she is in a beautiful and peaceful

place, a place where he or she can rest, a place where he or she is beyond the stress, the trials, the turmoil, and toils of this life.

**You restore my soul, O LORD,
and guide me along right pathways for your name's sake.**

Maybe, when we hear these words, we imagine, we hope, we trust that with those words, our beloved one is telling us that all of the sin, all of the mistakes, all of the challenges of life are behind them, that he or she is guided in the right ways, by a loving God, who will never let them go astray.

**Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear
no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

Maybe, when we hear these words, we imagine, we hope, we trust that though our beloved one has died, he or she has not experienced evil, but rather, comfort, that he or she has been brought through the valley of the shadow of death to a place of blessedness.

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over.**

Maybe, when we hear these words, we imagine, we hope, we trust that in the heavenly place to which our beloved one has gone, there are not more enemies, there is no more conflict, but a table prepared, a banquet for all, overflowing with good things.

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

Maybe, when we hear these words, we imagine, we hope, we trust that our beloved one who, we so often can affirm, experienced goodness and mercy and shared goodness and mercy during his or her life, continues to experience God's goodness and mercy in the house of the Lord, where our beloved one will live forever.

We say these words, we sing these words, we pray these words over our dead, and as we imagine and hope and trust that they express the experience of our beloved dead, perhaps they are a statement of our own faith, our faith in the promises of God, and our faith that someday we will experience the goodness God.

But what if, these words aren't only for the dead? What if they aren't only for the dead to speak and to share?

What if they are words for us? Words to fill our hearts and our mouths, not about someday in the sweet by and by, but words for us right now, to describe, not a heavenly experience, but the life that God gives us right now? What would that look like for us, to claim these words as our own?

What does it mean for us to say, right now, in the middle of a Coronavirus lock-down, in the middle of days we never imagined that we would see, on a day when we cannot find butter, or yeast, or toilet paper at the grocery store, or on a day when we are lonely and cut off from companionship, or on a day when our job is gone and we don't know if it's coming back, what would it mean for us to say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."?

In a time of scarcity, minimal scarcity in comparison with the daily reality of so much of the world's population, but still, far more scarcity than we are used to, what does it mean to speak of abundance, to say:

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over.**

What does it mean in a time when we who are so used to being busy, so used to having a schedule and plans and activities, so many things filling up our lives that sometimes we lament that we're "so busy", what does it mean for us to have to say, that we have nothing to do, no demands on our time, that we have not been deemed essential, that we are bored? What does it mean for us to say:

The LORD makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.

In a culture that values productivity almost more than anything else, what does it mean for us not to be busy? What does it mean for us to rest?

In a time when death is an ever-present reality, when every day more people die, even some that we know, when we cannot gather to mourn our dead, what does it mean to say:

**Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

What does it mean to find comfort in God's guidance and protection, even when we know that God's protection does not mean that we should put the Lord our God to the test and does not mean that there's no way that we could get sick?

When we cannot gather in what we have lovingly called "the Lord's house" our church building, when troubles are daily spread before us, in sensational news

reports and in daily lived disappointments and struggles, what does it mean to claim these words as true for ourselves in the here and now:

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

I think that Psalm 23 is a beautiful and loving expression of our faith and our hope and our trust, in God's promises when a loved one had died. But I think that it's more than that too.

The tradition surrounding Psalm 23 is that David wrote it long before he was king, when he was in conflict with Saul, running from Saul through the hills of Judea, with a rag-tag army and every reason to think that his life would be short and undistinguished. A shepherd turned soldier, turned rebel expresses his faith that God would be with him during the very real troubles and struggles that he faced as a living, breathing human being living through a time of danger.

And I think that Psalm 23 can be that for us too, that it can invite us to rest, invite us to trust, invite us to see the world and our lives with eyes of abundance, invite us to have courage and strength even in the face of death, and it invites us to rest in God's presence. It reminds us to see that God is present wherever God's Spirit dwells, and to know that God is with us, dwelling with us wherever we are, that it is Holy Ground, the place where God has chosen to make a home.

Psalm 23 has comforted many of us during times of loss and grief. May it comfort and strengthen us now, as we live its words in the daily reality of these challenging times, remembering that the Lord, is our good shepherd. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.