

A Shepherd's Song

Psalm 23

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I stood at the intersection of San Antonio and the West Arrow Highway in the heart of Upland, California, and I heard the song of the shepherd. That intersection, in a city some 40 miles east of Los Angeles, is nothing but sidewalks and pavement with cars racing by, but right in the middle of a Southern California city I heard the shepherd's song. And not only did I hear it, I saw things like green pastures and streams, cool, quiet, crystal clear streams flowing by. The song of the shepherd has that ability to take busy and hectic intersections of life and transform them into calm and tranquil centers of worship and wonder.

I was in Upland, California several years ago to perform the wedding for my cousin's son. Early that morning, still adjusting to west coast time, I slipped out the door of my cousin's house and wandered around Upland, in search of the corner of San Antonio and West Arrow Highway. Today the Pacific Christian Center sits on that corner. It is a ministry of the Brethren in Christ Church. In 1954 Upland College, a college of the Brethren in Christ Church, had its home at that corner of the city.

Sometime in the late summer of 1954 a young couple made their way from New Mexico to Upland College. They had a newborn son. The dad was about to begin school. The mom had grown up with a lot of loss, her own mother dying when she was five or six and her dad having a stroke soon after, which led to families in the Brethren in Christ Church taking her in and guiding her through high school and nursing school. Those families did more than simply raise her, they gave her a vision for ministry, and when she finished nursing school she accepted a missionary assignment to be the nurse and midwife for the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico.

To that same reservation a young Ohio farm boy came who never had a lick of success as a student. In fact, his father made fun of education, made sure the boy understood the farm was his place, and didn't have patience with those who tried to be better by getting educated. That boy somehow finished high school, and in the process had a sense that the world was bigger than a small farm in Ohio. He traveled a bit, by bus, with a big bag of peanut butter sandwiches. Then he chose to do alternative service and was sent out west to do his service at a Navajo Indian Reservation...in New Mexico, where this same rather attractive nurse was also serving.

I laugh when I read the letter a friend wrote my mom, remembering those early days when she and my dad first met. The friend describes my dad as a diamond in the rough. I think the friend was being generous. But my mom, who had been class valedictorian, not only fell in love with my dad, she believed he was more than a simple farm boy. After they were married, and after my oldest brother was born, they made their way to Upland, California, and my dad began the journey that would lead him to a college degree, a teaching credential, and eventually a master's degree from Reed College in Oregon.

So there I was, standing on the corner of what used to be Upland College, and the song of the shepherd was playing in my head. "The Lord is my shepherd..." How my parents trusted that song. How my parents trusted that shepherd. How that shepherd led my parents to green pastures and still waters and paths of righteousness. How that shepherd was present as they walked through the valley of the shadow of death.

We have an old yearbook from Upland College. My dad's picture is in the yearbook. He was a student, but he was wearing a nice shirt and a tie. College was a little more formal back in the day. Somehow he assumed the role of dean of male students, and that included supervising the dormitory. There is my dad, smiling, in a tie, far removed from the days of overalls and tractors, and the caption from the dean of male students says, "Boys will be boys." Those were good days for the young Eberly family. A future was open to them, my brother was adopted by all the students on campus, and my mom was surrounded by the Brethren in Christ community that meant so much to her. Maybe that is why I envisioned the still waters and green pastures as I stood on the corner of what once was Upland College.

Boy, am I glad my mom had that community of faith around her. Not long after they got to Upland, my mom had my brother Richard. He lived a few hours and then he died. I was probably around ten years old when we went back to Upland once to visit my cousins and my mom's sister, who also made their home in Upland. My mom took us to a small cemetery, we walked around for quite a while, and then she found the tiny tombstone. It was where they buried little Richard, the brother I never knew. Little Richard was also the son my mom never forgot. It means so much to know the Lord is our shepherd. You never know where the paths of life will take you. Or maybe we know exactly where the paths of life will take us. And because of that we hold so firmly to this precious song of the shepherd.

David is credited with writing the 23rd Psalm. Many Bibles have the words, "A psalm of David" with this psalm. That makes sense. David was a shepherd. David was a poet. David was a musician who highly valued music and songs and singers and instruments. And no matter how much we regret some of the choices he made in his life, tragic and disappointing choices, it is the Bible itself that describes David as a man after God's own heart.

The journey of David's life began in Bethlehem, where as the youngest of Jesse's sons he was out tending the sheep when the prophet Samuel showed up to anoint a ruler for Israel. David was the anointed one. That journey of his life took him from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, where he ruled as king. The shepherd became the king.

And isn't it interesting that years later, the seed of David, the Anointed One we know as Jesus Christ, was revealed as the King who became a Shepherd. Jesus, whose journey also took him from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, was actually on a journey of much greater import. He, the King of kings and Lord of lords, emptied himself and became a servant, becoming obedient even to suffering death on the cross. Or as Jesus said once, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." And then he said, "I lay down my life for my sheep."

What happened to me as I stood on the corner of San Antonio and Arrow Freeway and a busy intersection was transformed into green pastures and still waters is not unique to me. The incredible miracle is this type of thing happens all the time. People of faith become aware in the strangest of places that they are not alone, that the Good Shepherd is right there with them. It happens in hospital rooms and by the bedside of loved ones. It happens on youth retreats under open skies and in the rugged surroundings of mission trips. It happens when babies are born and baptized and couples are wed and married and when graduates graduate and when careers are started and when jobs are disrupted and it happens when life is a wilderness and we wander with aching hearts and it happens when life is green pastures and still waters and we feel the touch of our Lord saying he came that we might have life and have it abundantly and it happens on busy intersections and it happens in services of worship and it happens and it happens and it happens and it happens and because it happens we are blessed.

There is no place we can go where God is not already there. The Lord is our shepherd. Because of that, we shall not want.

So today, I offer to you a song of the shepherd. Over the course of my life I have come to realize I cannot sing. Or perhaps I should say I have come to realize I cannot sing well. I can sing. We all can sing. We all can sing the song of the shepherd. He keeps showing up at the intersections of life, at all the intersections of life, at each and every intersection of life, at each and every intersection of each and every life because he knows all of his sheep and he knows us by name. That is why this song of the shepherd is a song for all of us. And even though he is the shepherd for all of us, the psalm captures something profound. He is the shepherd for each of us. It is not selfish to say the Lord is my shepherd. It is just the way it should be. It is personal. The Lord is my shepherd. I know it is personal for me. I broke down and cried when the old grounds of Upland College were transformed into green pastures and still waters. It is personal. I know it is personal for me, and my great hope today is that it is personal for you. So let us come to the Lord's Table with these words of invitation.

23rd Psalm

¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.