

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

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A woman told a story about when she was a little girl. Her momma was a powerful presence in her life, and there was no question that the Spirit of God was active and alive in her momma's life. She radiated the glory of the Lord in all she said and did. Because of that, her momma was both beloved and a little feared. When the Spirit of the Lord is active and alive in someone's life, you learn to treat them with reverence, respect, and a little bit of fear. The Holy Other is present in this person's life, and that is not to be taken lightly.

So one morning this woman, who is now a respected pastor with many that treat her with a similar degree of reverence, opened her momma's bedroom door uninvited. This woman, only a small child of three at the time, came without invitation into her momma's bedroom, and she found her momma on her knees praying. This woman, just a child at the time, had stepped into the sacred space of prayer. She was not invited. Her presence might well be an interruption. And her momma noticed that her sacred space was no longer hers alone, but someone else had entered that sacred space.

When she noticed someone had entered, her momma did not become upset. Her momma did not become angry. Her momma just raised her head, saw her baby girl peering in, watching her pray, curious about the relationship the momma had with the one who is Holy and Wholly Other. When the momma saw her baby girl staring at her, wide eyed, aware that she had entered into sacred space, the momma raised her hand toward her daughter, pointed her finger at her daughter, and then with that pointed finger she signaled for her daughter to come near, to come by her side, to kneel with her, to join her in prayer, and to join her in worship.

Today we have a sacred text before us, the 23rd Psalm, a psalm about the Lord who is our shepherd. I want to invite you to draw near to this psalm, to draw near to this sacred text, to draw near to this heartfelt prayer, in the hopes that every single one of us might know this Lord who is our Shepherd, and that we might know this Shepherd in a deep way, to know him in a way that is personal, and to know him in a way that is profound.

The 23rd Psalm is attributed to David, the son of Jesse, a young lad who spent his days in the field tending his father's sheep. This same David stood up against the giant named Goliath with nothing but a sling shot and five smooth stones. This same David ascended to the throne and ruled from that throne in the city of Jerusalem. David was a poet, a songwriter, and he played the harp with such grace and skill that it could calm the angry spirit that filled Saul, the man who served as king before David. Can you see David, maybe as a young man with a ruddy complexion strumming the strings of the harp and pausing for a moment to point a finger at you, inviting you to experience this beautiful song he has written, to experience it in a way that is deeply personal and profound. Come and experience this psalm as a child, a child who played with the sheep, chasing and frolicking, discovering green pastures and calm, still waters. This is a psalm that invites not only a childlike trust in God, but also the innocence and sweetness of a child who has absolutely no fear of life. Everything is a big adventure as the shepherd leads us to pastures of plenty and sparkling streams.

When our daughter Hayley was four or five we had a birthday party for her at a lamb farm. Hayley loved animals, and her favorite animals were lambs. Julie arranged for a group of kids to go to this lamb farm and run wild and free. You never heard such laughter and delight. When the party finished, Hayley had a small misunderstanding with her mother. She was used to going to birthday parties where all the kids would go home with a party favor. Well, Hayley's understanding was that she was going to leave her birthday party with a party favor that had four legs and was a wooly delight. We have a picture of Hayley, four or five years old, missing her two front teeth but smiling for all she's worth, holding a little lamb in her arms making her way to the car to take her party favor home.

I see her beaming smile when David, strumming that harp and inviting us in, sings out, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters.” David is inviting us to come and play, to frolic, to leap and laugh and rest and be renewed by the love of a shepherd who is so very good, so very kind, so very loving, lifting us up and holding us close, smiling with delight in each and every single one of his lambs.

Perhaps the tune changes a bit as David strums, the melody taking on a tone that is darker and foreboding. As a shepherd David knew there were times when the sheep were in danger, describing times when the sheep were attacked by lions and bears. As this ominous tune fills the air David continues to point at us, continues to draw us near to this Good Shepherd. David sings words that speak of a shepherd who not only plays with his sheep, but whose very life is devoted to protecting his sheep. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” David faced lions and bears and he stood in the Valley of Elah when that terrifying giant named Goliath came at him breathing threats. David hid in caves when he was pursued by King Saul and he fled Jerusalem when his son Absalom rebelled and tried to take over the kingdom. David knew the God whose kindness was shown in times of play and seasons of plenty, and David knew the God who stood in the gap when the world was collapsing and enemies were conspiring. David’s finger beckons us to come near to the God who not only promised that he would never leave us nor forsake us, but David summons us to an encounter with the God who keeps that promise, who leads us through the fire and the flood, the dark nights and days of despair. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

David’s life saw him in many roles, a young boy shepherding the flocks in the field, a servant playing his harp in the courts of the king, a brave warrior defending the honor of God, and ultimately as king over the people of Israel. “In the ancient world, kings were known as shepherds of their people. Thus, to profess ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ is

to declare one's loyalty to God and intention to live under God's reign."¹ So David, the shepherd boy, the harpist, the brave warrior, now signals us as a great and mighty king to come near to this shepherd who is our Lord. Now David climbs off his throne and bows down, humbles himself, and worships at the feet of the shepherd who is King of kings and Lord of lords, the creator of the heavens of earth and the ruler of the universe. "Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care."

Might we imagine it is not only David pointing his finger at us and calling us to come near to the Shepherd who is Lord of all creation? When we are told that this shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness it is as if the prophets of the Old Testament point a finger and say come, draw near. Micah is summoning us into the presence of our righteous God who longs for us to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Amos, the fiery prophet who also spent his youth as a shepherd sweeps us close with the crook of his staff as he says, "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream."

When you draw near to this shepherd you find that his heart's desire is for the righteousness of God's kingdom to fill this earth. The green pastures he has prepared are a place where everyone is fed, as in the days when the shepherd led the people of Israel through the wilderness for forty years, daily providing bread. In those days there was enough bread for everybody. No one had too much and no one had too little. Those whose greed and fear tempted them to gather too much, to hold on to more than they needed found that it spoiled and caused a miserable mess. And when the shepherds of Israel betrayed their calling, when the leaders of the people looked after their own needs and neglected the weak, the vulnerable, the widows, the orphans, the strangers and the aliens, God had nothing but harsh words and judgment. This shepherd is serious about righteousness and justice, and he not only leads us in paths of righteousness, he calls us to follow with obedience and with our actions. The fingers of the prophets call us to come near.

¹ The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IV, p.767

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. I shall not want for there was a day when everyone was hungry, everyone was tired, everyone was thirsty, everyone was in need. I shall not want for on that day a man who came from the Father full of grace and truth looked out on that sea of humanity with all of their endless needs and the one who came from the Father full of grace and truth had compassion on that large crowd, he had compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So Jesus took bread and gave thanks and then multiplied the bread and the fish until every single person had eaten enough. To all of those wandering around like sheep without a shepherd Jesus became their shepherd. He became our shepherd.

Jesus, the Son of God, the Son who came to show this world the full extent of the Father's love, he is pointing his finger at us, at you, at me, he is signaling to us draw near, come close, he is reaching out his hand to grasp us and pull us to his side. He is saying, "I am the good shepherd...I know my sheep by name...I have come so that you might have life, true life, real life, authentic life...and that you might have life abundantly."

A preacher named Tony Campolo told a story many years ago, at a time when members of the gay community were not invited to participate in the church, when members of the gay community were excluded from the church. He said he was asked to do a funeral and when he showed up he realized it was a funeral for a gay person. It was a cold and rainy day. All of the gay person's friends showed up, and most of them were gay as well. These folks were used to being judged by the church, condemned by the church, and so even as he asked them to come near to hear the words of the service, they stood at a distance. Tony Campolo said he talked about Jesus and heaven and said a prayer, and then he shared the benediction and waited for everyone to leave and go home. But everyone stayed. After a while someone spoke. They were hesitant, they were stumbling over their words, uncertain if they could even have a voice, but finally saying, "Isn't there a verse about God loving this world?" So Tony shared John 3:16. Another voice said, "What about that one where nothing can separate us from the love of God". Tony read Romans 8, sacred words that tell us nothing in all

creation can separate us from the love God has shown us in Jesus Christ. This went on for a while until at the very end someone said, “What about the one with the shepherd.” And on that cold and rainy day, it was as if a group of people who had been pushed away for so long, who had spent many long years as ones who were weary and heavy-laden, it was as if the Good Shepherd named Jesus pointed his finger and said, “Come here. Come to me. I will give you rest.” And as Tony prayed the 23rd Psalm a group of God’s precious lambs came close and said together, “The Lord is my shepherd...”

When we think of the Lord being our shepherd it is hard not to remember the story where Jesus said, “If a shepherd has ninety nine sheep in the fold but one of the sheep is lost, won’t he leave the 99 and go and search until he finds the one.” That image of our daughter Hayley, holding her precious lamb in her arms and smiling that toothless smile does not compare to the joy on the face of Jesus when he finds a lost lamb, when he comes upon a sheep that has gone astray, when he rescues one of us from danger and from darkness. He said when one lost sheep is found the angels in heaven rejoice. The Lord is our shepherd, and he loves us. He knows each of his sheep by name and he loves us. He loves us so much that this Good Shepherd named Jesus said he would lay down his life for us, to protect us, to preserve us, to save us. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death he walks with us. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death he walks for us, in our place, saving our lives by losing his.

God’s finger has pointed at me hundreds of times and said come here, come to this psalm. He has called me near at funerals and in hospitals and on mountainsides and by roaring waterfalls and crashing waves and green meadows and clear and calm, yes, still waters. My guess is he has called you often to this psalm. Like that momma and her young girl God has found a thousand ways to call us to this psalm for comfort, for strength, for guidance, for direction, for assurance, and for courage.

Even though there have been many memorable moments when God pointed his finger and drew me near to this psalm, there is one I will never forget. A close family friend named Jack had taken his life. My brothers and I were ushers at his service, and our hearts were breaking. We were devastated. His little boy got up, mustered more courage than I would have had at that point, and his son read the 23rd Psalm. The pastor then gave a simple yet beautiful meditation. The words he said in closing are etched on my heart. He said that on the morning Jack died the good shepherd went out in the field. He found one of his lambs, one of precious lambs, wounded and dying. And the good shepherd, the one who knows each of his lambs by name, the good shepherd who loves each of his lambs with an everlasting love, the good shepherd picked that lamb up, put that precious lamb on his shoulders, and carried the lamb home. That image of the shepherd who will not ever give up on us, who will never leave us alone, who will come to us in our moments of deepest despair, that image is one I will never forget. Our shepherd really does love us, with an everlasting love, and nothing in all creation can separate us from that love.

So that holy and sacred and gentle and tender shepherd is pointing at us today. Come near. Come near to me, to the one who created you and redeemed you and guides you and blesses you and protects you and knows you by name and loves you with an everlasting love. Come to me. I am your Good Shepherd. Friends, let us come to our Good Shepherd as we pray together the 23rd Psalm.

23rd Psalm

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

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

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

4 Yea, 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.

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

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