

4 Easter Yr C, 17/04/2016  
Ps 23 & Jn 10:22-30  
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“Our loving Shepherd”

In both the twenty-third Psalm and our gospel we have the familiar biblical picture of a God who is like a loving shepherd. God our loving shepherd knows each and every one of us better than we even know ourselves. Moreover, God our loving shepherd is constantly on the search to gather in every sheep that is lost or in danger of some kind. In other words, God our loving shepherd wants you and me and every other human being to be a valued member of his flock, his family. This message, I think, rings out loud and clear in both Psalm 23 and our gospel.

The psalm starts off with the words: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Why shall I not want? Well, because the LORD is my shepherd. The LORD is my God, the Creator of heaven and earth and has created you and me and every other person in the world. We are created in his own image, therefore he knows us better than we know ourselves, since he knows every single detail of how we are made, who we are, and what we are made for. As a loving shepherd, God both gives us life and sustains our life by providing for our needs. So in this respect, I like to put the first verse in a positive way and bring out the causal nature of the sentence: BECAUSE the LORD is my shepherd, I have everything that I need. If it were not for him, we would not live, we could not survive, we could not be who we are meant to be, and do what he has called us to do in life.

I think many have the wrong or mistaken view of who God is and what he is about because people fail to realise that there is a difference between needs and wants. This is an important distinction. Needs are the basics of life, such as food, clothing and shelter, and some, if not most of us would add access to a decent education and healthcare. Wants are what we can live without in life; they are not necessities, but rather extras. They are what the advertising

industry would have us believe that we need. Everything from snack-food filled with preservatives; to at least three trips every year on your favourite airline to exotic places around the globe; to the most expensive new Mercedes or Volvo or BMW; to the latest fashion clothing, hairstyle, glasses, computer or cell phone, and on and on the list endlessly goes.

So our basic needs are supplied by the LORD our loving shepherd, and they are further described in verses two and three: “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. Food and drink are basics. The green pastures and still waters also suggest places of beauty and peace. Just as sheep need grass to eat and lay down on to rest; just as sheep need still waters to satisfy their thirst; so we human beings need green pastures and still waters to enjoy and be inspired by the natural beauty of such places; places of peace and quiet; places to restore us; to help us relax; to breathe the clean air; to think, meditate and pray; to restore our soul, our life by enjoying and appreciating God’s creation; to recharge our batteries so-to-speak. So God our loving shepherd provides for our physical needs and our spiritual needs with physical food and drink; as well as places of natural beauty to remind us of our Creator and help us connect with him by enjoying his creation.

Another aspect of God our loving shepherd’s provision for us is mentioned in verse three: “He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” In many and various ways; through many and various people too; God our loving shepherd reveals his will and purpose for us. He gives us the ability to discern, to know and to do what is right. Some Jewish scholars have pointed out that the phrase “right paths” or “paths of righteousness” has the sense of roundabout, indirect paths that end up turning out to be right for us.

A good example of that is, of course, the saving event of the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt. God did act and lead his people, but it didn’t happen instantly or in a straight and obvious way, at the drop of a hat. No, the Israelites and the Egyptians had to go through a series of confrontations and

plagues. Even after they crossed the sea and were delivered from the Egyptians; it was an indirect, roundabout route that the Israelites had to travel before they reached the Promised Land. Yet that time of wandering about in the wilderness was a time of testing and preparation for the Israelites. God worked through that time with his people to eventually lead them where he wanted them to be, in right paths—paths of righteousness for their own well being to fulfill God's will and purposes. So too it is for us. We may have to spend a fair bit of time in our lives travelling in wildernesses; going to roundabout and indirect places; places that are right paths for us by preparing, molding and shaping us in order to serve God's will and purposes.

Yes, there may be some rather challenging, if not scary places we need to go. Can we make it through such places, such threatening circumstances? Yes! Why? Because: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, (the valley of the shadow of death), I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me." Dark places would indeed most likely scare sheep who don't always have very good vision; thus making them vulnerable to night-time predators. So too with us humans, dark places can make us so fearful and so blind that we are paralyzed by the darkness and may feel rather vulnerable. At such times of darkness we may turn to God and ask the hard questions: "Where are you God? Why is this happening to me? What did I do wrong to deserve this? Why don't you help me? How long must I suffer, and what is the purpose of this suffering?" And so on.

Yet, we know that the LORD is our loving shepherd because, as the Psalm reassures us: "I walk through the darkest valley." I walk through. Walking through the dark places of life is only possible because God our loving shepherd is with us, leading us and protecting us. I like the way this is emphasised in Captain J. Rogers' "Seaman's Version of the 23 Psalm," where here writes: "Yea though I sail 'mid the thunders and tempests of life, I shall dread no dangers; for Thou art with me. Thy love and Thy care they shelter me." This protecting, loving, caring presence of God is also emphasised by

Jesus in our gospel where he sees himself as the Good Shepherd and his followers as his sheep, and says these words of reassurance: “No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

Yet, we struggle with these words of reassurance in the Psalm and the gospel because in our imperfect, sinful world there are many tragic and evil things that happen to people—in some cases people whom we are close to and love. Airplanes crash, people suffer and die from horrible diseases, more and more Christians around the globe today face persecution and are even captured by Muslim extremist fanatics and killed, on and on the list goes. Yes, all of these do happen, yet most, if not all of them are not God’s will. Rather, they are due to human error and negligence; as well as the lust for, misuse and abuse of power influenced by evil, and the sinful choices that people make.

There is tragedy and unspeakable suffering and evil in the world; yet there is love, mercy and kindness too. God our loving shepherd does see us through the darkest places and is a God who shows his love, mercy and kindness by suffering with us within the darkness. Moreover God our loving shepherd, as the psalmist states in verse five, is also like a head chef and generous host, providing a delicious meal: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

Why is the table prepared in the presence of my enemies? Some scholars have made the following observation. The Hebrew sense may mean having the enemies present by remembering; not necessarily their physical presence. Rather, by remembering them they are present and we can then even thank them for what we have learned from them. What we have learned from our enemies has been helpful in our life and so we can thank them.

This too may be an element in both the holy meals of Jews and Christians. In the Passover, the Jews remember what they suffered under the Egyptians, in that remembering it is as if they too are there suffering with their ancestors. In the Lord’s Supper, we Christians remember what Jesus had to

endure and suffer on the cross for the sins of the world. In our eating and drinking of the Lord's Supper we remember as if we were there while Jesus was crucified and are ever grateful for his sacrificial love and forgiveness that we so generously receive from him in this Holy Meal. In the remembering we can try to learn how not to be like the oppressive Egyptians and the people who orchestrated Jesus' crucifixion. In our remembering we can aspire to be like Moses and the Israelites who trusted in the LORD to deliver them. In our remembering we can be like the first generation of Jesus' disciples who were prepared to share the message of Jesus' love and grace with everyone in thought, word and deed.

As we remember and learn from our enemies in this way, we can declare with the psalmist in verse six: "Surely 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." God our loving shepherd is so generous, so determined and eager for us to have his goodness and mercy that he pursues us, actively chases us down until he catches up with us to give us his goodness and mercy. The sense of it is that there is nowhere we can go to escape or run away from God's goodness and mercy; our loving and generous God can run way faster than us.

So loving and generous is this God that he wants you and me and everyone to dwell in his house our whole life long, forever and ever. Jesus also emphasises this when he says in our gospel: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish."

Eternal life, dwelling in God's house is rooted in a close relationship with God our loving shepherd. The phrases: "I will dwell in the house of the LORD," and "I give them eternal life" do not only apply to a future life beyond this one right now. No. Rather, they refer to the here-and-now. One example that comes to mind is the provision of safe homes for the most vulnerable and needy in society. In our day, we strive to provide safe environments to frail and vulnerable seniors. Some organisations even have safety committees to

ensure that such homes are safe places for everyone. We also provide safe homes for vulnerable women and children who are victims of domestic violence. Safe homes for seniors and women and children in many cases do keep them safe and offer them opportunities for meaningful lives in the present. So it is that God our loving shepherd provides safe, loving caring spaces for us right now as well as in the future—hence giving us many wonderful opportunities to live life to the fullest. For that, thanks be to God!