

To Lead and To Follow
Psalm 23
April 21, 2024
First Presbyterian, Luling

Preaching on Psalm 23 is a tricky endeavor. On the one hand, it seems like it should be easy, because everyone knows it. Even people who have only come to church for a funeral, or only ever watched a funeral in a movie, have heard Psalm 23. A lot of people, with a little prompting, can recite it along with the rest of a congregation. There is no rule that it be read at funerals, but it's an expectation, for sure. Most people request it. And because it is the most well known of all 150 psalms, people have feelings about it. Not so much thoughts, because we rarely end up talking about it outside of a funeral context, but definite feelings about it.

I've found over the years that the most well-known pieces of Scripture are the hardest to preach on. My favorite passages, the ones that speak to me on the deepest level, are the hardest to talk about. Yet here we are, leaping into Psalm 23.

First we need to ever so gently extricate it from its funeral service location. Psalm 23 can certainly be read and understood as an assurance of God's care and faithfulness beyond death. And. And. And. It is certainly a psalm about life, in all of its complexities and complications; and God's care and faithfulness in the midst of life's complexities and complications.

It's a psalm about movement. Shepherds and sheep in the Middle East had to—still have to—move around constantly in search of grazing and water. Even the goats across the road from our house spend their days moving about the pasture, one end to the other, with occasional visits to the pond for a drink. Movement words are all throughout the psalm.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures," well, yes. Lying down is not moving, but the shepherd has to find the green pastures first, and lead the sheep to them. "He leads me beside still waters." "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." Or it's probably in your head, as it is in mine, "the paths of righteousness." That path word can refer to animal trails, like a deer path. Or to ruts made by wheeled carts, like a dirt road through a pasture¹. The shepherd is not blazing a new trail for the sheep to follow, but finding the paths that others have made before, paths that lead to water or pasture. God leads us on the right

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-psalm-23-17>

paths, paths that should be clearly visible to us, paths we can trust, paths that others have made before us. God is right there in front of us, showing us the way.

A friend told me this week about a sheep video. A woman was running in the French countryside. She's very clearly attired in running gear, much like any number of runners you might see here. The person taking the video is out for a hike and hears the bells of sheep coming toward her on the trail. She steps to the side and begins the video. The runner comes down the trail at a medium pace, and the whole herd of sheep is behind her, jogging along. The runner stops when she sees the hiker and explains what has happened. The sheep must have been lost, or temporarily without their shepherd, or maybe didn't have a shepherd at all. She ran through their field, happily enjoying the fresh air. One of the sheep spotted her and decided she was their new leader. So they all followed her. They stopped and waited patiently while she talked with the hiker. And when she started running again, so did they. Her plan was to lead them back to a pasture area in the hopes that they might find their way, or their shepherd might find them. She was their leader, showing them the way, leading them down a path to what she hoped was safety.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley”—the valley of the shadow of death—“you are with me.” We see here that this psalm is not just about death. But it's also about life, the hard parts as well as the peaceful parts. God, the shepherd, is not absent during the darkest valleys, but present.

The image of God as shepherd, the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, is clearly about God being our leader and we being followers. We trust in God as our shepherd, to lead us in the right paths, to guide us safely through dark valleys, to find still waters and green pastures. We trust God our shepherd to lead us when we need guidance, when we don't know which decision to make, when we are overwhelmed with options, when we are willing to relinquish control. We trust God our shepherd to be with us when we face any number of adversities.

But that's not all that's in this Psalm. It's not just a psalm of us following God where God leads us, not just a psalm of God's presence in all of life, not just a psalm of God's guidance and care.

This last verse, I love. “Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” “Follow” there is more like “pursue” or “chase.” It's the word used for enemies in pursuit.² What an image, then, goodness and mercy chasing after us all the days of our lives. If the Lord is our shepherd, then goodness and mercy are the

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sheepdogs nipping at our heels. Even if we aren't doing a great job of following the shepherd, goodness and mercy are keeping us on track. It's not enemies pursuing us, frightening us into the straight and narrow. But goodness and mercy chasing us back to the right paths when we've messed up. Forgiveness and kindness following after us.

All this reminds me of another psalm. Psalm 139, the one that starts "O Lord, you have searched me and known me" includes these words: "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." Hemming me in, in front and behind, leading and following us, keeping us on the right path.

Here is the good news in psalm 23, as I see it. God's care extends to us beyond death. We affirm that every time we use this psalm at a funeral. And there's a lot more. There are right paths, paths that God knows. God leads us on those paths. When we turn aside, or walk way too close to evil, God's right there. And not only that, but mercy and goodness are following right behind us, guiding us from behind, picking us up when we fall, making sure we don't linger in places we shouldn't. All of that is good news.

I'm going to close with part of a prayer that's attributed to Saint Patrick, yes, that Saint Patrick. It's a prayer for protection on a journey, much as Psalm 23 is a declaration of God's presence on a journey. It's called the Breastplate of St. Patrick. And, in part, here it is:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me. Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me. I arise today through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity, through belief in the threeness, through confession of the oneness of the creator of creation. Amen.³

³ <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/st-patricks-breastplate-prayer-irelands-patron-saint>