

April 22, 2018: Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year B)
Psalm 23: Hot Pursuit

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, a day that is designated by many churches as Good Shepherd Sunday. All the texts for this Sunday focus on this theme. We are going to read the psalm this morning, Psalm 23. Let's read it together.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

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

Did it sound familiar? You don't have to answer that question. I know the answer. I am willing to bet that every single person in this room has heard it before. Some of you probably have it memorized. Of the 150 psalms in the book of psalms, the 23rd psalm is easily the most well-known. These six verses are probably among the most well-known verses in all of Scripture.

You have probably never attended a funeral service where this was not read. It has been featured in several movies and television shows, either at the scene of a graveside, or as someone is walking into a scary situation, about to meet their untimely demise. Since these are the typical contexts in which we hear these words, hearing them read in a setting like this one, on a beautiful spring day, with the birds singing, and the flowers blooming; it almost seems out of place. But the 23rd Psalm is for all of life.

As psalms go, the 23rd psalm falls into the category of what biblical scholars call psalms of trust. There are two standard elements to this type of psalm.

First, a psalm like this assumes some type of crisis. Because of the reference in this one to the "valley of the shadow of death," we think the particular crisis psalmist is referring to is the death of a loved one, or maybe even his own death, but a more accurate translation of this phrase would be "the darkest valley," or "the deepest darkness."

This doesn't mean the crisis the psalmist has in mind isn't death. Death would certainly qualify as the deepest darkness we may experience in life. But it suggests that the author of this psalm does not have a specific crisis in mind, but is writing more generally about all the darkness we will encounter in our lives. I think this psalm is written by someone who has lived much of their life already, and has several dark experiences in mind, including death.

The second element that a psalm of trust contains is the conviction that the crisis that is being experienced, or any that have yet to come for that matter, will pass. That no crisis will have the final word in their life. That no crisis will define their life. For this particular psalmist, this conviction is grounded in the fact that the LORD is his shepherd.

This psalm of trust, like any psalm of trust, is essentially a word of testimony, and a powerful word at that. It is a testimony about what life is like for the person who has made the LORD their shepherd, and

there is an emphasis on something that comes to mind when we think of what a shepherd does, and that is that a shepherd leads.

His Good Shepherd has led him to green pastures and cool waters, where he can find everything he wants, and receive the rest that he needs.

His Good Shepherd has led him down paths of righteousness, meaning he has taught him how to live rightly, to live in right relationship with God and his fellow human beings.

His Good Shepherd has led him safely through the darkest moments of his life, and situations where his enemies threaten to do him harm.

His Good Shepherd will eventually lead him home.

One thing you could say about this Psalm is that it is a powerful testimony about a God who leads his people.

This is my testimony. I know several of you who would say the very same thing. God has been leading me, often in ways I did not see. This becomes more and more apparent the older I get. With the benefit of hindsight comes clarity, and understanding of the way God has directed my path. I'm reminded of a more contemporary version of the hymn we sung this morning...

All the way my savior leads me
 Whom have I to ask beside?
 How could I doubt his tender mercy?
 Who through life has been my guide.
 And when my spirit clothed immortal
 Wings its flight through realms of day
 This my song through endless ages
 Jesus led me all the way.
 Jesus led me all the way.

You lead me, and keep me from falling
 You carry, me close to your heart
 And surely, your goodness and mercy shall follow me...follow me

That last line points to an often overlooked truth in this psalm, that not only is this a powerful testimony about a God who leads, it is a powerful testimony about a God who follows. A God who follows his sheep their entire lives, until the day they die.

Really the word "follow" doesn't fully express how the Good Shepherd relates to his sheep. The best English translation from the original language is the word "pursue." The Good Shepherd pursues his sheep. There is a difference between follow and pursue.

The idea of God following us is a comforting thought. I imagine a parent who lets their child walk to school by themselves for the very first time. Unbeknownst to the child, the parent follows closely behind, keeping just out of sight, ready to swoop in at a moment's notice to rescue their child if necessary. Imagining God this way is very reassuring. But God pursuing us?

The first thing that comes to mind when I hear the word pursue is an intense police chase. Sirens blaring, the smell of rubber burning, tires screeching as both pursuer and pursuee take corners too tightly. The video footage of O.J. Simpson fleeing from the police is not a good example of what I'm talking about. The coldest pursuit ever.

If not a hot pursuit, maybe the word pursue makes you think of a hunter feverishly tracking down its prey, or that guy or girl in high school that was obsessed with you, but you just didn't think of them in "that way."

Whatever comes to mind, it is probably not something with positive connotations. Apply that to God, and the image that comes to mind is anything but comforting. If God pursues us, if he chases after us, if he hunts us down, what possible chance would we have of escaping? Maybe that's the point the psalmist is trying to make. With the LORD as his shepherd he can never get away from his goodness and his mercy, no matter how hard he tries.

Why would he want to? Why would we want to? We do try to get away from God. We do sometimes stop following God. We want to lead our own lives. We want to go our own way, head toward what we perceive to be greener pastures, and cooler waters. We want to define what righteousness looks like for ourselves. We would rather rely upon our own strength in the darkest valleys of our lives. We turn our backs on God, but he never turns his back on us.

I have a very vivid memory of driving to work one day when I was sixteen years old. My place of employment was a driving range / putt putt course / ice cream parlor. I was cruising down Route 7, headed toward Leesburg, in my 1986 Toyota Corolla. The music was blaring. I was listening to a song by a band I really liked by the name of Live. It was from their Throwing Copper album. The song was called Pillar of Davidson. I heard these words...

The shepherd won't leave me alone
He's in my face and I,
The shepherd of my days...

Those words brought me to tears.

I have done a lot of research into the meaning of this song. You can find all kinds of explanations online. I really don't know what the authors meant by those words, but I can tell you what they meant to me.

The God I followed, who was leading me, was, at the same time, following me, pursuing, even hounding me. If I chose to give up on him, he would never choose to give up on me, even to the point of getting in my face if necessary, not to punish me, not to reprimand me, not to scream at me, but to remind me of how much he loved me.

I don't remember going through any specific spiritual identity crisis at the time, but one was coming, as they do for many. The teen and young adult years can be difficult ones, especially for faith. You are being introduced to new ideas, and possessing the freedom to explore those new ideas. I guess God was reminding me of his love that would never let me go. His compassion and kindness that would pursue me until the day I died.

In that moment God also addressed a constant, nagging fear of mine. In the tradition I grew up in people would ask the question, “Is it possible for a person to lose their salvation?” This is a result of the belief that a person must choose to follow Jesus. Also called a belief in free will. If a person can choose whether or not they follow Jesus, then it follows that a person can also choose not to follow.

Some people I was looking to for reassurance would say an act of disobedience was equivalent to choosing not to follow. So some people would try to answer the question by posing a hypothetical situation. They would say, “suppose you are driving your car along the interstate, someone cuts you off, you shout some profanity at them, then immediately lose control of your vehicle and die in the accident that follows, before you had a chance to repent. Would you go to hell?”

It’s a scary scenario to imagine, especially if you are a person that ever makes mistakes, which is basically everyone I know, including myself. Maybe you have never asked that question. I stopped asking it that way when a good friend pointed out that we lose things like our keys and our wallet, but not our salvation. A better word to use would be reject, because to reject something requires a conscious, deliberate, choice. So the question then becomes, can a person reject their salvation? Maybe this is something you have wondered about.

We all know people who were sincere followers of Jesus once, and then for some reason, fell away. They stopped going to church and praying, and reading their Bible. They started making poor decisions, engaging in some sinful behaviors. Then before they could turn it around, some awful tragedy struck, and their life came to an end. Or maybe they are still living, and they have yet to turn it around. And we wonder where people like this will spend eternity.

I can’t say with certainty where any person will spend eternity, none of us can, but what I can say with certainty is this:

If we have made the LORD our shepherd, he will never leave us alone. He will lead us as we follow him. If we should ever choose not to follow. He will follow us, and pursue us, until the day we die. No matter how far we have run from God, no matter what we have done, the moment we turn around, even in our last breath, with our final heartbeat, there he will be, ready to welcome us back into the fold. Because he is bound and determined to bring us home.

The LORD is my shepherd...Is that your testimony too?