

# *Under the Shepherd's Care*

a sermon

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Psalm 23

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I feel a little uncertain preaching on the psalms. And especially on *this* psalm, the 23rd.

Maybe in some ways it helps that this one is so well known. Really, it may be the most familiar piece of Christian (and Jewish) scripture. In much of the Western world, even those who know very little about the Bible, even those who don't consider themselves to be religious, know it or at least are somewhat familiar with it, because they have heard it often at funerals.

And this makes sense. That Psalm 23 would be read at funerals seems so right. Because it speaks comfortingly of God's love and care in the midst of challenge and even danger. It expresses with such assurance how God's "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

So many have been comforted and given hope by this psalm's gentle words.

So many hear their faith given voice by its beautiful lines.

So many find meaning in its metaphors and images.

But this is also part of the difficulty in speaking about this psalm. Because the meaning that people find in it is so personal,

deeply connected to *who* they are inside  
and *where* they are in life,  
tightly wrapped up with their experience  
of God and of the world.

It just doesn't seem right for me to saunter into a pulpit and then, in a sermon short or not-so-short, tell y'all what this psalm *really* means. As if the meaning you have already seen in this psalm has no independent integrity, and must be corrected or confirmed by me. I don't buy that.

Part of this struggle, I think, comes from the very nature of the psalms. I mean, the psalms are *poems*. Which means that *how* they "mean" is different than how other kinds of writings "mean." They have imagery, and rhythm, and shape, and texture. They are meant to delight and to be delighted in. The truth of a psalm is as sure as the truth found in other parts of scripture. But its truth is not expressed as a list of propositions, and to try expressing its truth as such a list risks ruining the psalm.

So maybe there are times when the meaning of a psalm is not one thing only. Maybe a psalm can mean a number of things,

each of them valuable,  
each of them beautiful,  
each of them true,

depending on how and when it speaks into the life of the person who hears it or reads it or hears it read.

Billy Collins was the U.S. Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003. He has a lot of experience teaching people about poetry ... or trying to. Apparently it can be a bit of a challenge. So he wrote a poem that reflects those classes and workshops he's led. It's called "Introduction to Poetry":

*I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive.  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,  
or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.  
I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.  
But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.  
They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.*

"What it really means." This is such an important warning to me, to all of us, about how we work with the psalms. Because, isn't it actually the case that the meaning (or *meanings*) we find in a psalm come about, not from our working on getting a psalm, but when the psalm has worked on us, and then we find that the psalm has gotten us?



Let me say a little bit, then, about some of what I'm hearing in this well-loved psalm, so that maybe the meaning you yourself find in it, from it, by it, will become even more deep and broad.

I hear it describe the Lord as a shepherd. From beginning to end, I hear it speak of the Lord in this way. And not only about the Lord-as-shepherd does it speak, but also about us it speaks, those who are under the Shepherd's care.

I know it's an image, a painting in words, of God's love. I would never think that the psalmist thought God was actually a literal shepherd. Psalm 23 doesn't tell us that God can be found in a field somewhere with sheep and lambs. Instead, I know that this imaginative description of God as a herder of sheep says something about God that needs to be said.

In this shepherd image, I hear the psalm speak of God's protection. I hear it speak of God's direction. I hear it speak of God's unfailing love.

Sheep are not smart animals. And, compared to some other animals, they are not strong. They sometimes wander: off the path, away from the pack, into situations difficult and dangerous. They can become lost. They can become dinner.

A shepherd is supposed to keep the sheep safe and secure. A shepherd is the guider and protector of the sheep.

In the psalm, the Lord-who-is-shepherd does this with his “rod and staff.” With rod and staff, the Lord guides and protects the sheep:

knocking predators away,  
pulling or pushing the sheep into line,  
setting the pace,  
showing the way.

That word for “rod,” in the Hebrew, was also used for the scepters and maces of monarchs. A royal scepter was a symbol of power and strength. It represented the king’s might by which he would drive away or even slay his enemies in defense of the people. And in the age when the psalms were composed, a king would in fact, on occasion or often, be called a “shepherd.”

But in the psalm the *Lord* is described as a shepherd. So I hear this as a challenge to all those kings who thought of themselves as shepherds. I hear this as a correction to all those who,

out of devotion  
or fear  
or fawning  
or even hero-worship bordering on idolatry,

called those kings “Shepherd.”

I hear it saying to such monarchs who flattered and fancied themselves as the shepherds of their people, “Uh, not so much.” I hear it as setting the bar, or describing the ideal, for all those who would lead others. I hear it relativizing and even rejecting the pretensions of national leaders. I hear it as subversive and unpatriotic, but for all the right reasons.

I hear it as the heartfelt confession of faith by the person of faith who knows that her or his ultimate security and deepest comfort is not in heads of state nor in ministers and pastors but in God: “The *Lord* is *my* shepherd!”

Not King David,  
not Solomon,  
not Nebuchadnezzar,  
neither Cyrus nor Caesar,  
neither George nor Barack nor Donald,  
neither Bob nor Russ nor Dick nor Dave nor Dan.

No. The *Lord* is *my* shepherd.

Just as it did for human rulers of ancient times, the rod that the Lord-as-shepherd uses likewise symbolizes God’s strength and power. It likewise is a figure for God’s protection and care. Yet God does this more deeply, more certainly, with more love and concern, than do other shepherds.

“Rod” implies protection from enemies. The Lord who is my shepherd uses the rod to knock away those who want my destruction. This note of protection continues throughout the psalm,

with the divine shepherd setting a feast for the sheep  
in full view of their hungry predators  
who can do nothing but look on;  
with the divine shepherd disempowering  
all mortal enemies who would pursue the sheep;

so that in the end we learn that it is only the shepherd who is in loving pursuit of those in the flock: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow (or *pursue*) me all the days of my life.” This is the blessed state of being for those under the shepherd’s care.

But there’s also an element of discipline implied with “rod.” God’s care of the sheep will sometimes involve correcting them, knocking them into line or into shape with firm love and gentle control.

I hear this, and I know that this is still meant to be heard and understood as a psalm. So I shouldn’t push this too far. Because I know that some people understand God’s correction and discipline in a real hard way, so that God becomes in their imagining a stern task master, a harsh disciplinarian. Some imagine that God is just waiting for them to make a mistake so they can be beaten into obedience.

With respect, with love, I think that is a sign of their spiritual immaturity.

Yet I know that other people can’t get behind the idea that God disciplines the sheep. They understand God as being fine with us, just as we are. All that stuff about law, and commandments, and obedience, they say, these are just uncomfortable artifacts from a primitive age. It’s almost as if God has very little need to forgive us, and our current patterns of living are in little need of improvement. It’s all fine.

That, too, is a sign of their spiritual immaturity.

The truth is that God loves us in part by guiding us, disciplining us, correcting us. One of the tools God uses is what is often in scripture called “Law.” Other words are used as well: instruction, teaching, precepts, path, way ... to name a few. And in the many passages that speak of this tool, the Bible shows not only an acceptance of God’s discipline but even a profound joy in it.

Like this, from Psalm 19:

*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.*

(Psalm 19:7–10)

So I hear Psalm 23 as telling us, reminding us, that the Lord, my shepherd, seeks our good and shows divine love by teaching us, by correcting us, by guiding us.

God does this so you might grow into becoming more and more the person who you most truly are, the person you are most truly meant to be.

Because you are under the shepherd's care.



I hear more as well. A lot more, actually, and I don't have time to go much farther in sharing what I hear.

But in this psalm I also hear Jesus. I know not all do. My Jewish friends likely don't here Jesus in the psalm. And I get that. It actually is a risky thing to do in interpreting the Bible, to "Jesusify" every Old Testament passage.

Yet I think there's something right for one who is in Christ to hear Christ in this psalm. Not as a prediction of Christ. Instead, it's somehow right for me to hear the psalm confirming what I know of Jesus and experience of him. I hear the images of the psalm and the ways of my Lord as complementing each other. I hear the psalm giving me language to express and understand my devotion to him who saved me and made me his own.

The Lord Jesus is my shepherd.

One of my Old Testament professors, James Luther Mays, put it this way:

"In the Christian rereading of the psalms, Jesus ... is the one who restores our souls, leads us in the paths of righteousness, accompanies us through danger, spreads the holy supper before us in the presence of sin and death, and pursues us in his gracious love all the days of our lives" (James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, p. 119).

My friends,

hear this,  
know this,  
be comforted by this,  
delight in this:

being joined to Christ, you are under the Good Shepherd's care,

for your blessing,  
for your holiness,  
for your growth,  
for the glory of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.