

Psalm 23; John 10: 11-18

The Bond of Recognition and Trust

A Psalm of David.

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 right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I 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 my whole life long.

When get I a call during my volunteer shift as Albuquerque Police chaplain, I am usually responding to a request to be with a family who have just lost a loved one. We get to be there for the darkest moment of their lives, ostensibly to bring comfort. Because they are often Catholic, I always carry with me a small Catholic prayer book, and Psalm 23 is among the select Scripture texts. In our Protestant circle, too, and in fact, even at funerals that are otherwise quite secular, along with the hymn Amazing Grace, Psalm 23 is a staple whenever people gather seeking comfort at a time of loss and grief. Perhaps you have memories of your own when the words of this Psalm brought comfort in difficult times.

The Psalm names for us the reality that along our life's journey, we find ourselves walking in the darkest valley, or come face to face with enemies who threaten us, and we are reassured by the psalmist's words that even in the most life-threatening situation, God has our backs, and we are in good hands.

On this fourth Sunday of Easter, in this season of new life, we are invited to listen to this beloved psalm afresh, with a new focus. What if we listened to this Psalm, not only as familiar words of comfort for the times of loss and trials, but as a song about living our everyday lives with confidence and trust.

In the ancient world, kings were known as the shepherd of their people. So, for me to say, "the Lord is my shepherd," is to confess my loyalty to God and my intention to live under God's rule. The psalmist here is David, the beloved King of Israel. So, who is this God whom even a king calls as his shepherd and puts his trust in?

David says, “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” Sure, these are comforting, calming, peaceful images, but, beyond that, for a sheep to be able to lie down in green pastures means it can eat, and in safety! For a sheep to be led beside still waters means it can drink; eating and drinking, his soul is restored, and his strength renewed; his life is sustained. King David is saying “God keeps me alive” in the most basic and fundamental level of everyday living.

And even though we think of the Psalms as a book of prayers and Psalm 23 certainly is read as a prayer for comfort, King David in this Psalm is not asking for protection or comfort but declaring what God does, has done and will surely do for him. King David is confident, he knows God does all these things, like a Good Shepherd, and so he trusts the Lord to supply all his needs.

Leaving behind the shepherd image, King David turns to address the Lord God directly, “You prepare a table before me, you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” He recognizes and names God’s life-giving, loving acts for him and says, “I am so blessed.”

Surely God’s goodness and mercy and love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. David may be an earthly King, with heavy responsibility to care for his people Israel as a shepherd would his flock, but before God his King, his Shepherd, David is brought into the house of Lord, a place where he belongs and is cared for forever. This psalm expresses a relationship that is held by the bond of recognition of God’s saving acts and the trust that it creates in David.

Steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus surely knew this psalm, and many other references to God as the Shepherd. And as Psalm 23 shows us, to speak of a Shepherd is to speak of his or her relationship to sheep. Shepherd gets to be a shepherd only in relationship with sheep. No sheep, no shepherd.

With this fresh reading of Psalm 23 about the Shepherd, as a song for the living of our days, hear now, the words of Jesus the Good Shepherd in John 10: 11-18.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves

me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

Even though the word Pastor comes from the Latin word for Shepherd, in the community of Jesus’ followers, all are sheep who follow the one true, good shepherd, and that is Jesus. All members of the faith community relate to Jesus the Shepherd equally, though some may be more lost than others and some more stubborn than others. Jesus is the Shepherd to all those who hear his voice and, trusting, follow.

And this hearing and following his voice, recognizing his voice and trusting it, is what bring individual sheep into the fold, uniting us in the shared identity as his flock. Each of us hear the voice of this One Good Shepherd in our own hearts, but the moment we turn toward the voice, we find ourselves “enfolded” in the company of multitudes of sheep, with whom we share One Shepherd in common. We don’t follow alone. The bond of recognition and trust is the bond between the shepherd and the sheep but also among the sheep who are united as one flock under the one shepherd, and that’s what gives us our identity as the church, and the gate remains invitingly open for more to come through.

Whether they are already inside the fold or yet to be called, as the Good Shepherd, Jesus says he knows them who are his own, and they know him, JUST AS, God, whom Jesus calls Father, knows him and he knows the Father. Jesus relates to God as *his* Good Shepherd, guiding him, protecting him, promising life and eternal belonging. The bond between Jesus and God is the bond of recognition and trust.

I wondered if Jesus recited Psalm 23 to himself when he was walking through the darkest valley, and finding courage in the words of King David, boldly proclaiming that God the good shepherd will not only protect him and supply his needs but also prepare a table before him in the presence of his enemies...I wondered if Psalm 23 sustained him in those dark hours of betrayal, as he hung on the cross dying, and in the cold darkness of the tomb, until God raised him at the dawn of Easter.

In Psalm 23, King David names God’s life-giving acts as his Shepherd, of making him lie down in green pastures, leading him beside still waters, restoring his soul.... Jesus, too, assumed the duties of the shepherd, leading, guiding, feeding, protecting and seeking the lost. And the ultimate life-giving act of Jesus as our Good Shepherd was to lay down his own life.

He laid it down, though, knowing that he would take it up again, claiming the power granted by God of life to overcome death forever and for all. That is what Christ the Good Shepherd offers to us and what God accomplished, and what we celebrate on Easter.

Jesus was willing, and did in fact laid down his own life for us, because Jesus trusted his Good Shepherd will supply all his needs and will sustain his life, even through death. When we hear Psalm 23 not just as a personal prayer for comfort and assurance as we walk through our personal darkest valley, but as an invitation, or even a command to a community of faith to live in confidence, recognizing, trusting and following the voice of our Good Shepherd, what fear concern can the church be liberated from? And what life-giving acts can the church engage in in the name of our good shepherd?

When we join a church, we do so as an individual member, we are a sheep among other sheep, but in joining, we come to belong to a flock, we become a member the house of the living God to live together forever. If we respond to this call of Jesus who responded to the call of God, and embrace our life together following our Shepherd who supplies our needs, from what fear or concern can we be freed? And if we lack nothing and fear no evil, for what is our church willing to “lay down its life” trusting God will raise us to new life in Christ?

What life-giving acts can we, as a church, offer to the world so skeptical of the loving relationship with the Divine that is held by the bond of recognition of God’s saving power and trust? We are still in Eastertide, may the Spirit grant us the power to the church to lay down its life for God’s flock, and be raised as Christ as been raised. May we continue to live into the mystery of faith this Easter. Amen.