

The Shepherd To Whom We Belong

Psalm 23

April 29, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

Though the election is still a year and a half away, the race for the White House is on. That means for the next 18 months we can enjoy the comic irony of watching some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in our country try to portray themselves as common folk. It's an awkward dance that candidates must perform. On the one hand, they want to convince us that they are qualified for the job they seek. But at the same time they also want to prove to us that there is nothing special or unique about them; they are just ordinary working people like you and me. Just notice how many campaign ads will appeal to "common sense values" and "proven strategies that work." No high-falutin, overly sophisticated ways of thinking here; just the same old plain common sense that the guy on the street would use.

Of course, candidates are only dancing to the music we provide. We as voters have said that we want and deserve leaders who have sharp minds and deep intellects, people who can think critically about our complex world. And yet, we have also said that we want leaders who are in touch with day-to-day life, who are not so far removed from the real struggles of real people that they can't lead from real experience.

Well, long before there were political think tanks and professional consultants, King David provided Israel with a leader who was both. On the one hand, David was a brilliant thinker and wise strategist. It was David, for example, who truly unified the northern and southern tribes of Israel into one cohesive nation. By moving the capital from Hebron in the south to the more centrally located and easily defensible Jerusalem, David gave the people a new center of national and spiritual identity, a place that would come to personify all of Israel's hopes and dreams.

But David began his career in leadership in the most humble and ordinary of circumstances. David was not an elitist who came from a wealthy family or an Ivy League school. He came from the rugged hillsides of Palestine where he spent his days and nights herding flocks of sheep. David was a shepherd. He knew from first hand experience what it was like to eek out a meager existence by the sweat of his brow.

His experiences as a shepherd shaped David in profound ways. Though David would make disastrous mistakes, he never forgot what it was like to have vulnerable creatures depending upon you for their care. He approached his God-given task of leadership not out of a

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spirit of “overlordship,” if there is such a word, but out of a spirit of servanthood. He desired to do what was best for God’s people. That’s what a shepherd does.

I can think of no better example of the impact those early days of shepherding had upon David than the beautiful words of the 23rd Psalm. Undoubtedly the most well known and one of the most deeply loved passages of Scripture in the entire Bible, this Psalm of David draws upon the rich pastoral imagery of a shepherd’s life to speak of God’s care and guidance, images that come alive as we read them. Even if we’ve never been around sheep or their shepherds we can still see the green pastures in our minds; we can hear the quiet trickle of still waters; our mouths water over the abundant table spread before us; our souls long for the goodness and mercy of God. With these words, David the shepherd king has struck a nerve deep within us.

And yet it is a nerve that can be raw at times. For to read these words is also to become aware of the fact so much of life seems out of sync with the images they hold forth. Our souls resonate with the promise of tranquility and provision and divine care in these words, and yet we know there are definitely people in need, times of conflict, and experiences of feeling un-cared-for in life. Life is not always a lovely stroll beside quiet waters. That is why we must be careful to understand what this Psalm says and what it does not say.

What the 23rd Psalm does not say is that everything will always be fine. This Psalm is not a guarantee of our personal comfort and security at all times. Consider for a moment the “paths of righteousness” that David celebrates in verse 3. What exactly is a path of righteousness? Strictly speaking, it is a clearly marked path, a path with straight and defined margins. That’s what the Hebrew says. Like a clearly marked hiking trail, you can easily pick it out in the midst of the underbrush. You don’t have to guess whether you are on the right path.

But where does this path lead? According to the very next verse, it leads through the valley of the shadow of death. Strangely, this clearly defined path of righteousness does not lead us around trials. It leads us through them. In other words, God is not telling us in these words that if we only love him enough and follow him with enough commitment that he will shield us from any and all harm. To believe that wouldn’t square with the example of Jesus, who not only laid down his life for us but also called us to be ready to do the same for others. God has not

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promised us that we will not suffer and struggle in this life, and we should not hold God to promises that God has not made.

What, then, does the 23rd Psalm say? Simply put, it tells us that we have a providential God. It tells us that our lives are not in the hands of random chance or dumb luck. They are in the hands of a sovereign God who creates, sustains, keeps, guides, intervenes, and directs the lives of his people and the created order in which they live. It tells us that our lives and their outcomes are not accidents of nature, but the expressions of a God who acts with intention and purpose.

To affirm this, David only had to look back on his life to see all the ways God had acted to bring about good, even when times were bad. Some have suggested that David penned these words as he reflected on his early experiences with King Saul. You may remember that Saul, who initially saw David as a brilliant protégé, eventually came to see David as a rival and a threat to his power, and he set out to kill him. And so David had to take to the hills, literally. He spent ten years running for his life in the wilderness, likely hiding out in some of the same caves he had once used for shelter back in his days as a shepherd. One can only imagine the kind of despair and anguish David must have been experiencing in those moments. He had just begun a promising career in public service, when by no fault of his own his life was being threatened by a madman.

Or maybe David wrote these words as he reflected on his experiences with Absalom, his son turned enemy. Absalom for a time succeeded in overthrowing his own father from power, and so once again David had to take to the hills and hide, this time from his own flesh and blood.

Or maybe David wrote these words as he reflected on his experience with Bathsheba, the mistress whose husband David had murdered and by whom he fathered a son out of wedlock. As God's punishment for such a heinous sin, that child died.

David's life was filled with such tragic moments. He could have been thinking about any of these experiences when he wrote these words, because there was one consistent theme that ran throughout them all – God was at work in David's life doing God-things in all of them. David now realized that God's holy plans were being worked out in David's life, even when the

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circumstances were falling to pieces. David could see that God was at work guiding the story of David's life, using the triumphs and the tragedies to bring God's purposes to pass.

It was, for example, during those ten wilderness years on the run from Saul that David's skills as a military strategist were being honed and sharpened, skills that would later be used to conquer Jerusalem. It was in the painful experience of running from his son Absalom that David rediscovered the power of forgiveness and compassion, a power that seems to have faded from his life in the strains and demands of governing a kingdom. And it was through his marriage to Bathsheba that a union, which began in sin, would become a union that bore Solomon, the wisest king in Israel's history, a union that became the bloodline through him Jesus' lineage would eventually be traced.

This was how God had been the good shepherd to David – not by protecting David from harm, but by never allowing David's life to dissolve into total chaos. David could look back over the experiences of his life and discern a meaningful pattern, a pattern woven by a God who was determined to bring His purposes to pass, even in the midst of tragedy.

What David experienced in his personal life is exactly what the nation of Israel experienced in her corporate life – namely, that God was guiding her towards a good end that she could have never accomplished on her own. When you read the story of Israel in the Bible there is a recurring theme of people who are surprised by a God who seems to make a way for salvation to happen when there is no way. When the Hebrew people find themselves stuck between Pharaoh's advancing army on one side and the Red Sea on the other, God parts the waters. When those same Hebrew people are facing what seems to be certain starvation in the barren wilderness, God sends manna from heaven. God acted to preserve his people and his purposes in their lives.

And even when those people fell into hardship, even then God still acted to work out his purposes in their midst. Think of young Joseph sold into slavery by his older brothers. He winds up in Egypt, far from home, forced to serve in the courts of Pharaoh, where he experiences one humiliation after another. Eventually, Joseph earns Pharaoh's favor and becomes the number two in command.

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Meanwhile the older brothers back at home find themselves in the midst of a famine. Their people are on the brink of starvation and they are forced to go down to Egypt seeking aid. And before whom are they required to appear and make their appeal for help? Their kid brother, Joseph – that's who. They didn't recognize him at first, but when Joseph finally revealed himself, they were terrified. After all, they had done something terrible to him, and now in this dog-eat-dog world where one bad turn deserves another, they figured they were in for it.

But they weren't, because Joseph had a revelation. Joseph now realizes that it wasn't his brothers who were ultimately responsible for him being in Egypt. It was God. Joseph forgives his brothers, not because he's such a nice guy, but because he can now see that it was God who sent him there to Egypt for the express purpose of saving the lives of God's people when the moment of famine came. I'm sure that on that fateful day, when the brothers had traded Joseph for a few silver coins, neither he nor they realized that God was working through them. But now, they can see it. God was in control all along, working, guiding, preparing, shaping. God's purposes provide the real drama to this story, not the nasty scheming of a bunch of jealous brothers.

That is how God shepherds us – not by steering us clear of all dangers, but by promising that he will never abandon us to our own resources. The real drama of our lives is not provided by the ups and the down of circumstances we face or by the outcomes – good or bad – of the choices we make. The real drama is provided by a God who is absolutely determined to have us for himself. God the shepherd will take loose and fragmented ends of our lives and tie them together in a cohesive and meaningful way.

That is why it is no coincidence that Jesus will use this shepherd imagery to describe himself and his actions on our behalf. He is the good shepherd, he says, the one who not only guides and instructs his sheep, but who lays down his life for their sake that they might know there is no power in heaven or earth that will keep God from saving them – not even a cross. In fact, the cross is very instrument that becomes the means of salvation for all people. When the Roman and Jewish authorities conspired to have Jesus nailed to it, they couldn't have known

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then that God would use their nasty scheming to bring about the redemption of the world. But he did.

When you think about the story of your own life, it may sometimes seem read like a transcript from the evening news. “And now this,” says the anchor, as she moves on to tell another story of bad news that seems to have little connection to the previous story of bad news that her co-anchor just finished telling. There is no cohesive narrative that ties all these fragmented bits and pieces together. I had a professor in college who was famous for saying that life is just one thing after another. Life does have that feel, sometimes - disconnected, random events that seem to be going nowhere. But with all due respect to college professors and news editors, the Bible tells a different story. It is the story of the good shepherd who is guiding us through all the twists and turns, a God who will not rest until he has led us all safely into his fold.

Thanks be to God. Amen.