

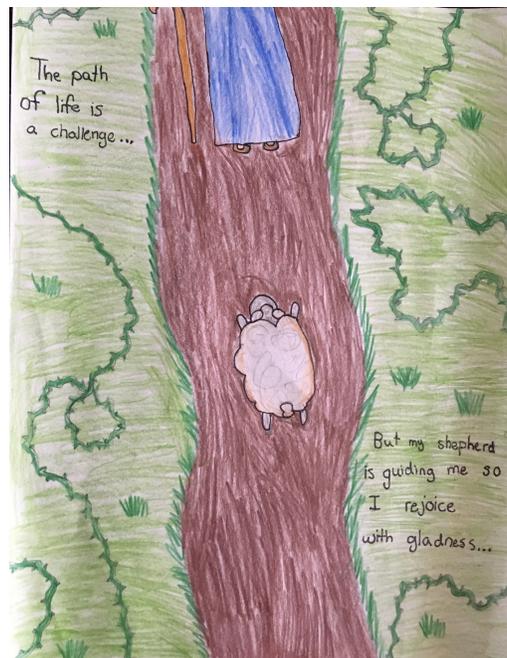
The Shepherd Who Provides; Series: Loving the Lord in the Land

Psalm 23

Westside Fellowship CRC; 13 October 2019

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I mentioned to my family that I was going to be preaching on Psalm 23 this week – and was talking to Tim about the part of our trip that I was going to bring up, and Naomi said, “Oh! That’s like my I Believe Statement!” You may have seen it the morning we had some professions of faith: “The path of life is a challenge, but my Shepherd is guiding me, so I will rejoice with gladness.”



Our Shepherd guides us, so we will rejoice with gladness.

Today, on this Thanksgiving morning, I want to unwrap the gift of Psalm 23. We can't take everything out of the box because there is just So Much In Here. We could preach Psalm 23 in 52 different ways, and not be finished with it... But today we can be thankful that we have a Shepherd that provides for us... in all kinds of ways. Five ways that our Good Shepherd provides for us... provides for us so much that we are not in want... we have everything that we need.

First, God, in Jesus the Good Shepherd, leads us along straight paths... right paths... Now, I think that usually when we think of paths, we think of paths like this picture that Naomi

coloured. But on our trip, George showed us the paths of sheep and goats and they looked like this:



Now, these don't look much like paths, nor does they look particularly straight. But here's what we did... George was taking us up a mountain at the top of which was Herod's temple... a temple mount within which Josephus tells us that John the Baptist was beheaded (more on that in another message). But as we made our way up the mountain, we paused for a teaching. George asked a number of us to climb over this wall and he placed us at various points on the descent/decline of this hill.



From the vantage point at the wall, it just looked like a steep hill but from where each of us stood, we could tell that we were on a path – a ridge – a line of strata. Apparently these 'paths' have been formed by millennia of shepherds leading their sheep through these hills. In some ways they hardly look like paths, and they certainly don't seem at all straight. But the nature of

the path – the straightness – or the rightness of the path isn't determined by geometry or geography, it's determined by the leadership of the shepherd. You're on the right path if you're following the Shepherd.



The point that George made then with us, and that has stuck with me all this time, is that there are so many paths throughout these hills. It's easy to point at some other sheep and say, you're not on a path, let alone the right path... but if the sheep is following the voice of the Shepherd, that sheep is on a straight and right path. It is our job to keep encouraging people to listen to the Shepherd's voice... our paths might not be the same, but we can trust the Shepherd is leading each of us. There is not a Right Path, there are right paths following the Shepherd. (This doesn't just justify anything and everything... but there is something to the trust we can have in the Shepherd to lead... even if our paths aren't exactly the same).

Second, God in Jesus the Good Shepherd, provides us with food – and food in the presence of our enemies, to boot. Something else that was clear on the paths of righteousness was that the green pastures were hardly the abundant rolling pasture lands of chest-deep alfalfa that comes up on google images when you put in 'green pastures'. The video I'd like to show you is not George De Jong, our rabbi, but Ray Vander Laan, another teacher in the holy lands... teaching about the green pastures of the Negev:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmQgJrK_iu4

We think of Thanksgiving as a time of abundance... but when it comes to our spiritual lives, it may be that a tiny piece of communion bread and a tiny cup is a better metaphor for God's provisions, perhaps, than a bursting cornucopia, or an overlaid Thanksgiving meal table.

Our Good Shepherd provides us with food... and food in the presence of our enemies, to boot. If we make it a habit of taking this psalm and reading it through the lens of the New Testament... seeing Jesus as our Good Shepherd... then we need to look at this whole eating-in-the-presence-of-enemies bit of Psalm 23 through the lens of the NT as well... When it comes to food and enemies in the NT, Jesus doesn't say, I'm going to feed you in the presence of your enemies so that you can gloat over what you have and what they don't have... No, he says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." And in Romans 12, Paul says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink," which, by the way, is wisdom from the Old Testament as well... it's basically a quote of Proverbs 25:21.

Last week I talked about our internal enemies... How each of us has on the inside our deepest critic, our seediest shame voice... We all have enemies within. And I thought, hm, what about them and food... A couple of years ago, I told you the old Cherokee tale that a grandfather told his grandson: Every person has two wolves living inside them. One wolf is evil: anger, jealousy, greed, resentment, fear, etc. The other wolf is good: joy, love, peace, hope, empathy, kindness, and faith. The little boy asks his grandfather – which wolf wins? And the grandfather says, "the one you feed." And the question I asked, then, was, What are you feeding? Fear or Faith?

And now the question I have, as I have been learning about the importance of listening to the different emotions and parts of ourselves... Do we really starve anger, jealousy, greed, resentment, and fear? I mean, I get what the grandfather was trying to say, but could starving the darkness inside of us not be a recipe for creating even more of a monstrous wolf inside of us? What if our internal enemy is hungry, what if we gave them something to eat – perhaps just a little mouthful of pasture, and asked it what was going on and what it needed... Just a thought!

God provides us with a leading on paths of righteousness... God provides us with food, food that we may even offer to our enemies... And third, God provides us with his presence in

the valley of the shadow of death. I want to say two things about this bit... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... (I know the new NIV translation says darkest valley, but we are going to go with what has been pastorally meaningful to so many for generations on this one.) What one commentator on this passage said – that I hadn't noticed before – was that you cannot have shadows without light... When it is pitch black outside, you cannot see any shadows... it is only when something dark blocks the light that is also there that you have a shadow... Some of us are going through some pretty dark valleys right now... there are some pretty deep shadows around us. But saying that these are shadows is a testimony. It is a testimony to your belief and your trust that the light is there... the object – the thing – it might be blocking the light and creating this shadow, but the light is there. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are with me.

You are *with me*... *You* are with me... That's the other thing to notice... Up until this point in the psalm, the Lord has been referred to as the Shepherd and he/he/he, and now, the psalmist turns from talking about his Good Shepherd to talking to his good shepherd. I know that I have told you this story (looked it up – 5.5 years ago), but I am going to tell you again... When I was 22/23 years old, I worked one on one with a 7/8 year old boy with autism, named Caleb. While I worked with him, he learned to say many new things. That was one of our largest tasks – increasing his verbal skills. All day long, we broke down learning into its smallest component parts, and step by step, taught Caleb how to identify things, and communicate his needs. One of Caleb's activities was learning to identify people. I had a stack of pictures and I would say, "Caleb, who is this?" And teach him to correctly say, "This is Mrs. Greimann. This is Mr. Breems. This is Greta. This is Josh. This is Heidi." And I will never forget the moment when I showed him a picture of myself for the umpteenth time, and he looked at the picture, and then he looked at me, and he took my face in his hands and got his face up close to mine and said, "Heidi!"

When you are in the valley, your theology has a way of turning from talking about God to talking *to* God... from simply being led by your Shepherd to being with your Shepherd, and your Shepherd being with you.

All of this begs the question, of course... If we have a Shepherd... if the Lord is like a shepherd, then we are like sheep. One of the times that George De Jong got the most animated on this trip was when he was talking about sheep. He said, you have had too many pastors and teachers tell you that sheep are dumb. "Sheep are not dumb!" he yelled. "Sheep know how to trust! Sheep were made to trust! Sheep were made to trust the voice of the shepherd!"

George told us the story of an Israeli woman in Bethlehem whose shepherd husband was taken to jail and whose flocks were then also captured and taken away from her and mixed in with the other sheep outside the jail. The woman went to the jail and begged the guard to get her sheep back – as these were their family's livelihood. The guard laughed, and looked out over all the sheep that were there, all of them looking the same as all of the others... He said, "If you can gather your flock from all these, then you can take them home." The woman's son played his little flute, and 14 heads popped up and came easily out of the flock. Sheep were created to trust. You were created and made to trust... and to follow the voice of your shepherd... who does not only lead you... but is also with you...

And finally, our Good Shepherd does not only provide us with leadership in right paths, with food, with his presence in the valley, and with a voice to trust... the Lord also *follows* us with goodness and love. The Lord is ahead, the Lord is with, and the Lord is behind... following with goodness and love.

Today, you may have an opportunity to reflect – to look back on your life... on this year... Do you see your Shepherd? Do you see your Shepherd following you with goodness and love? Or perhaps the metaphor turns ... turns from the Lord as a shepherd to the Lord as a sheepdog following us – the hound of heaven - bringing in the strays – keeping us moving from behind... (I actually heard that there was once a Scottish highland shepherd who had two sheepdogs named Goodness and Mercy! - <https://frightfullypleased.blogspot.com/2012/02/goodness-and-mercy.html>)

(I closed with a paraphrase of this story from Stan Mast: Perhaps end with some version of this, paraphrased, from Stan Mast https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-4b-2/?type=the_lectionary_psalms):

Which is why we need to do a "memory tour" every once in a while. I learned that term from my wife, who was a special education teacher. One of her students had a closed

head injury suffered in a car crash. The injury erased many of his memories. The doctors told his parents to take him on a memory tour to help jog his memories. So, one summer they took him back to all the places he had been as a child where he has especially enjoyed himself—the playground at elementary school, the beach on Lake Michigan, Disney World, his grandparents' home, and many others—to restore his memory.

If you want to strengthen your faith in the Good Shepherd, take a memory tour. Recall all the places and times you experienced the goodness and love of God. If that doesn't work, because there is too much bad back there and you simply cannot remember enough good times, then take your tour further back, back to that day when the Good Shepherd laid down his life for you. Stop at the cross and repeat these words, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus my Lord."