

**Sermon: Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
**Psalm 23, John 10:1-10 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | April 30, 2023**

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The Psalmist in Psalm 23 declares: "The Lord is my shepherd." Every time Israel sings this Psalm in its worship, Israel declares: "The Lord is our shepherd." Through the words of the Psalm they are acknowledging God's role in their lives. They are acknowledging that it is God who leads, provides, protects, and revives them. The opening line then continues: "I shall not want" or "I shall lack nothing." In its worship the Israelite community believes that since the Lord is their shepherd, they shall not be in lack.

But doesn't this seem too simplistic. Was Israel truly never in want? Did it lack nothing? And if David was the original author of this Psalm wasn't David in want and in terrible trouble? Both the Psalmist and the community know better. They had experienced threats, defeats, and failure. Their history is filled with episodes of conflict and desperation. There would later be a complete destruction of their kingdom and they would be forced to live in exile. And yet the Israelites held on to this Psalm. In spite of all that they are able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing." How?

I think it's important to realize that this Psalm did not arise out of a naïve understanding of life. In fact, the Psalm itself clearly states that they 'walk through the valley of the shadow of death,' that they live in the 'presence of their enemies'. The quite confidence in God displayed in the Psalm was born out of an experience of pain and struggle.

That confidence in God, I think, comes from the fact that they knew that God had not abandoned them at any point during their struggles. They knew that God was with them.

At the turn of the twenty-first century George Salton wrote his holocaust memoir titled "The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm". This holocaust survivor recounts the heart-breaking story of how his childhood was destroyed by the Nazi occupation of his homeland in Poland. At age 14 he was separated from his parents and was dragged for three years from one concentration camp to another going through extreme hardship and suffering. Why did George title his memoir "The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm"? In George's words: "'I [had] lived the words of David's psalm: 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.'" He continues: "I felt that David, who wrote the psalm, must also have gone through some terrible experience. I wanted to acknowledge the psalm had special emotional meaning for me."

Psalm 23 is not naïve about suffering. People throughout generations have found that the Lord is their shepherd, that they shall not be in want, and this they have found right in the midst of suffering. They have been able to find confidence in God. Many have committed this Psalm to memory. To many this Psalm provides words to a mysterious faith that pierces through present hardships and experience God's care, protection, and providence.

And that is why, when the Psalmist is walking the valley of the shadow of death they are able to say: "I shall fear no evil; for you are with me." Even when we walk through hard times, can we say in the words of the Psalm: "you are with me." The idea of God being with us is central to that quite confidence in God. God is always with God's people. God doesn't abandon. And that's the only reason the Psalm can say despite all the troubles of life, "I shall fear no evil; for you are with me."

Like a shepherd leads one's sheep, God leads his people. There is something to be said of the theme of God leading people. The entire story of Israel is a sort of journey, and the constant concern is whether God is leading Israel, and if Israel is following God's leading. In today's Gospel, Jesus talks about leading the sheep from a fenced sheepfold out to the pasture for food and water. The Gospel says: "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

I wonder how often we acknowledge that God is leading us in our lives. We live in a world which exalts a self-reliant, independent attitude, and a world which keeps us occupied with such busy lives

that it's easy to end up thinking that we don't have or need a shepherd. Of course, the imagery of shepherd may not have the same meaning in modern urban life as it did in the past or in other cultures. We are after all using finite and limited language in an attempt to describe an eternal reality: the reality that God wants to provide his creation with care and leading.

The truth is God sustains, God provides, and God cares for his creation. Just like Psalm 23 talks about a God who leads people to rest in green pastures, who takes them beside still waters, and revives their soul, in the gospel today Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." To have life abundantly. That's why God came. Can we fathom that? Abundant life for all creation- for us and for our fellow beings. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing, for he came that I may have life, and have it abundantly.

To acknowledge God in our lives, to know his voice, to follow him, that is the way of the abundant life. I close by repeating the opening collect for today: "O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice, we may know him who calls us each by name and follow where he leads." Amen.