

**Eat, Drink, Live**  
(Psalm 23 and John 10:22-30)

Every year on the Fourth Sunday in Eastertide the Revised Common Lectionary includes the *Twenty-third Psalm* and a gospel reading that uses the shepherd as a metaphor for God and Jesus. Ron refers to this Fourth Sunday in Easter as “Shepherd Sunday.” While I have always been aware of the Lectionary reference, I had never heard it called “Shepherd Sunday” until I came to West Chicago and met Ron Benner.

Shepherd Sunday seems to be one, just one, of Ron’s passions in our liturgical cycle of worship. I’m not sure why, but I am guessing that it might have something to do with the very unique hymns that connect with the theme of shepherd, like the middle hymn we sang this morning – *The Lord’s My Shepherd, I’ll Not Want*.

According to our *United Methodist Hymnal*, the words are from a Scottish Psalter dating back to 1650. It’s an interesting turn of the words to the *Twenty-third Psalm*. I have to say that as Lisa Marie and I were preparing the Power Point, we wondered whether or not the words might have really been written by Yoda of *Star Wars* fame.

This Shepherd’s Sunday does present us with the opportunity to take a closer look at perhaps the most familiar verse in the biblical text – *The Twenty-third Psalm*. Please pray with me.

Creative God, you are like a shepherd, the one who knows us and leads us. Illumine the words

of your holy scripture this morning so that we might see you in a different light, in a different way through the abundant richness of meaning compressed into that scripture. Help us to be aware of and open to the power of your Holy Spirit as you fill our hearts and minds this morning. In Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

The *Twenty-third Psalm* presents certain challenges for those who would aspire to interpret its meaning. Perhaps the most formidable challenge lies in the fact the psalm is so familiar and powerful that interpretation would seem superfluous. Why would one want to look between the lines and behind the text for yet more meaning? As pastors and biblical scholars, however, we are always called to do just that. Without doing damage to the text of the *Twenty-third Psalm* we know and love, let’s see if we might open up those powerful words so that we might hear them in a fresh way.

First of all, consider the most familiar setting in which we typically hear the verses read. That setting would be the funeral. Whenever I sit with a family to plan a funeral service, the *Twenty-third Psalm* is the single most requested scripture. According to William L. Holladay, it has become “an American secular icon” and is almost exclusively associated with the funeral

service.<sup>1</sup> The *Twenty-third Psalm* is also frequently read at the time of death, in the hospital or nursing home. For this reason, it has become closely associated with death and dying. This meaning has, however, been misunderstood throughout time.

The *Twenty-third Psalm* is really about life and living; it's about God's place in our lives and in our living. It's about the nature of God. In our *Disciple One* group we have learned that classic Bible study asks us three questions about any given scripture: (1) What does it say about God?; (2) What does it say about us as humans?; and (3) What does it say about our relationship with God? This morning, let's consider what the *Twenty-third Psalm* tells us about God.

### **The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need.**

In the very first line we encounter Ron's shepherd image. Shepherds don't herd sheep. Sheep have a flock mentality. They don't need to be herded. Cattle and goats need to be herded because they have a herd mentality. Sheep follow and, therefore, need one who will lead.

Why do sheep follow? Well, in the first place, sheep don't just follow anyone. They follow the one whose voice they know, the one they know will lead them safely and care for them. The shepherd leads the sheep and takes care of their every need. From the point of view of the sheep, the opening verse in the *Twenty-third Psalm* says it all. The shepherd is my leader, the one in

whom I place all my trust because he or she gives me all that I need.

This first line is also reflected in our gospel reading this morning from John. Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life ..." [John 10:27-28a *NLT*] So from the very beginning, the psalmist tells us that God is the head of the flock and that God provides us with everything we need.

### **He lets me rest in green meadows;**

The next line begins with the pastoral image of the sheep "resting" in a green meadow. This is perhaps the first place our fixation with death and dying begins to lead us away from the real meaning that the psalmist is trying to convey. The shepherd didn't bring them to the green meadow to die. He led the sheep there to eat! Rest from the journey is needed, for sure, but the sheep need to be nourished by the succulent green grass in the meadow. They need to eat in order to live! And who provides the nourishment and sustenance for life? Why God as the good shepherd does. When the sheep acknowledge that they have all the need, one of those needs is food to eat. In our Christian imagery we call it "bread for the journey."

### **He leads me beside peaceful streams.**

In the last part of the second line, the sheep acknowledge that the shepherd also leads them along "peaceful streams." Peaceful streams of what? Water! Cool, refreshing, life-giving water. While the psalmist continues with this wonderfully calming pastoral imagery, the sheep need water

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), page 359.

to drink, water to be refreshed, water to sustain life. So right at the beginning of our study of this text we can begin to answer the question, “What does it say about God?” God provides us with the essentials of life – food and water – so we can eat and drink.

### **He guides me along right paths ...**

This is where God’s grace comes into the picture. Through God’s justifying grace we are made right with God and are being prepared for entering into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ – with the good shepherd. In and through Christ Jesus God justifies us and claims us all as children of God – members of the household of God. The good shepherd leads his sheep along the right paths so that they can sense God’s presence in their lives. The right path is not always the easiest path. Sometimes the path is steep and rocky, but the shepherd knows how to negotiate the path, and more importantly, the shepherd knows where the path leads.

**Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.**

In this verse we can also be led into thinking of death and dying rather than life and living. Many translations use the term “valley of death” instead of “darkest valley.” This is not a reference to death but reminds us that it is the nature of God to always be with us. Food and drink are essential to life, but they are only two aspects of “all that we need” to live life. Security is also essential.

At the end of the day when the sheep bed down for the night, the shepherd continues a vigilant watch. In the first century Mediterranean culture, the sheep were typically kept in a rock-walled pen. The walls were high enough and thick enough to prevent most predators from jumping into the pen. There was only a single narrow opening wide enough for the sheep to pass. At night, the shepherd would sleep in that narrow opening to protect the sheep from attack.

The good shepherd protects the flock, providing the flock with security. The shepherd is always with the flock, morning and night to provide that protection. Whether we realize it or not, God is always present in our lives. This is the faith of the psalmist. This is our faith.

### **My cup overflows with blessings.**

The shepherd provides the sheep with all that they need. The sheep eat, drink, live! They have abundant life through the providential nature of God. What more could a sheep want but to eat in green pastures, to drink from cool waters, to sleep under the protection of a loving and caring shepherd. Eat, drink, live!

**Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.**

The psalmist closes with a “statement of faith” that captures the nature of God and what we believe about God. God pursues us, always calling us back to the flock, even when we stray. God wants us to eat, drink, live! God’s goodness and unfailing love

restores us to the flock without scolding us for straying. In spite of our tendency to wander from the right path God leads us down, despite our tendency to stray from the flock, God's grace is always there to welcome us back.

No matter how bad we are, God's grace – that goodness and unfailing love – is always available to us. And no matter how good we are, we can never be deserving of God's grace nor can we ever earn it. God's promise of eternal life is for all the sheep – it's for all of us.

So what does the *Twenty-third Psalm* tell us about God? God wants us to eat, drink, live! God wants abundant life for all of us, even when we don't live up to the expectations of right living. God is always there to welcome us back, always pursuing us to return to right living. God wants us to eat, drink, and live in this life and the life to come. For this reason, the *Twenty-third Psalm* is about life and living, not death and dying. Eat, drink, live!