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Psalm 23 – *You Are With Me*

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### Psalm 23

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,

<sup>3</sup> he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

I think you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who doesn't recognize this Psalm...

Someone who does not at least recognize the opening words:

“The Lord is my shepherd...”

It is by far the most popular Psalm...

And most-beloved by many of us.

We hear the words of Psalm 23 spoken at funerals...

Its words are used to comfort the dying and grieving—

And rightfully so—

Because it is a Psalm of trust in what the Lord can do.

This morning I want to affirm the comfort we find in Psalm 23—

Affirm that this is a good place to turn—

But I also want us to lean into this Psalm a little more...

I want us to be willing to see it afresh.

Because for some of us this Psalm has become too familiar...

Our familiarity with Psalm 23 has softened its power...

We've removed its teeth...

Its strength and authority.

This is a Psalm that meets us not just in death...

But in the harsh realities of life.

It calls us to recognize God's presence...

In the crises that come our way...

But also, through life's day to day trails.

Psalm 23 opens by talking about a rather vulnerable population...

Sheep.

The sheep we're thinking of here are sheep in the Ancient Middle East...

Vulnerable sheep.

These are not sheep from a petting farm...

Whose biggest concern is to avoid getting jabbed in the eye by a 2-year-old.

These are not sheep enclosed in a pen...

Protected from outside threats...

Being fed at regular times of the day.

These are sheep who must wander in the wilderness—

From barren land to barren land—

In search of scarce grass and water...

Always on the move looking for their next meal.

Often, water and grass were found in the valleys or near canyons...

Away from the heat of the sun.

But these shadow valleys were high-exposure places...

It made the sheep extremely vulnerable to attack.

Because their enemies came here too...

Enemies would wait in the shadows provided by the valleys and rocks.

Predatory animals ready for their next lamb burger.

The sheep are vulnerable:

They are constantly searching for water and food;

And they are constantly living under the threat of ending up on another animal's dinner table.

This Psalm meets us right where we are at...

It doesn't soften our position...

Or try to tell us things are better than they really are.

It speaks of life on life's terms.

**And right now, we are vulnerable people...**

Susceptible to lack and even harm...

Wearied from our current reality...

We are living in a difficult reality.

I read a news story this week of a mother who called the police on her daughter.

Her daughter Lindsey lives with autism...

And since the pandemic she has had her life upended:

She cannot go to school where she received special care;

Her routine and her caretakers...

Which she counted on was taken away from her.

One day, Lindsey got dressed and walked out the door.

She wanted a bag of Doritos from Family Dollar.

Along the way she took off her pants.

The mom couldn't take it any more...

She didn't know what to do.

The mental health crisis hotline put her on hold for 45 minutes before...

So she didn't try that;

The emergency room never helped...

They just sent her home after labs turned up normal;

So as a last resort she called the police.

When the police showed up Lindsey got agitated and hit her mom on the back hard...

Right in front of the officer.

"I can take her in," the officer said.

"I've tried everything," her mom said exasperated.

She paced the parking lot, feeling hopeless, sad and out of options.

Finally, in tears, she told the officers, "Take her."

And the police took her to jail.

This is not some dead-beat, inept mom.

She is actually a working nurse.

This is a portrait of life right now.

We are a vulnerable people.

I've heard someone refer to these times as the covid slog...

Where we're trudging through the deep swamps of covid...

Exhausted and with heavy steps.

We keep trying to put one foot in front of the other...

But just picking up our feet is getting hard.

Just this last stretch has been treacherous for many of us:

Chris Olthuis' dad passed away from covid complications very unexpectedly 10 days ago;

Joanne Thys has been in the ICU with life-threatening complications since last Monday...

Family isn't allowed to be by her side;

The revoking of the Keystone Pipeline permit by President Biden was a big blow for Alberta's economy and thousands of workers;

Some of you are anxious about council's decision to meet in-person for worship starting next week...

Some of you were anxious that we weren't meeting in-person already;

The decisions we have to make today are difficult and often polarizing;

Stress at home is high;

Stress at work is high;

People's patience is low;

We're separated from our families and loved ones;

*At best*, we are trudging through life right now...

Vulnerable and susceptible to physical, emotional, and spiritual threats all around...

Often times our faith and our sanity waivers...

Feeling like we cannot trudge for much longer.

*This* is where Psalm 23 meets us...

It doesn't pretend that life is okay;

It isn't a platitude that has lost all meaning.

Psalm 23 recognizes our plight and our place in life...

And it speaks to us with a fierceness that the Lord is with us.

"I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

This is a constant refrain throughout Scripture:

When Moses trembles at the thought of leading the Israelites to the promised land, God says:

"My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Ex 33:14)

"I am with you, keep trudging."

When Israel was in exile in Babylon, God said:

“So do not fear, for I am with you;  
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you and help you;  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (Isa 41:10)

“I am with you, keep trudging.”

We are promised the Lord’s presence as we walk through the shadow valleys—

Full of danger, uncertainty, and anxiety—

But who is this Lord that promises his presence...

What can we say about him?

What characterizes this shepherd?

His power, provision, protection, and pursuit.

### **First, his power.**

The word shepherd was used differently in the ancient world.

It wasn’t a cozy word as we might consider it today... (Goldingay)

A soft-spoken person caring for their flock...

Keeping to themselves.

In the Ancient Middle East, “shepherd” was a word used of great kings...

Shepherds were sovereign (in control) over the land.

People looked to them to lead.

The people of the land wanted to be led by a great shepherd...

Someone with power and authority.

“The Lord is my shepherd” is the opening claim of the psalmist.

“The Lord is my great king.”

“The Lord is the one who has all authority and power.”

“The Lord is the one who leads me.”

It sets the tone for the rest of the psalm.

And it challenges us to consider who is leading us.

In our self-made, individualistic culture where “I/me” rules...(Scott Hoezee)

Are we allow ourselves to be led?

Or are we trying to find all power in ourselves?

The psalmist says “Yes, *the Lord* is my shepherd/king...”

“May *his* authority be over me.”

“I want *you* to lead me Lord!”

The Lord is the creator of the heavens and the earth...

He holds it in his hands.

When he is present with us...

It is the same power that controls the wind and the waves...

Who brings the sun up and down every day.

His power is present with us.

The second thing we notice about this shepherd:

**His provision.**

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”

It literally says, “I do not lack...”

You’re waiting for this verb to have an object—

What is it that you are not lacking?—

But the psalmist leaves it open-ended. (Scott Hoezee)

It’s as if the psalmist is saying:

“In the presence of my shepherd, I’m not lacking anything.”

“When my shepherd is here, I have everything I need.”

The sheep are led to green pastures...

Amidst the barren landscape of Ancient Middle Eastern wilderness...

The shepherd has led his flock to green pastures and quiet waters...

A place of provision...

Where they can eat and drink and rest.

And this provision, it's not just momentary, it's abundant.

It's one thing to be provided for—

I'm sure someone living in poverty appreciates a warm meal...

Or exhausted parents appreciate an hour break from the kids—

But what about a lifetime feast for the one living in poverty;

What about unlimited rest and a restored spirit for the tired parent.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I do not lack...”

In the Lord is provision...

And provision in abundance.

In his presence—

Our third piece—

### **Is his protection.**

This was one of the main tasks of a shepherd:

To protect their flock.

David, as a young shepherd, gives this account of his work over his sheep to King Saul:

“Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, <sup>35</sup> I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. <sup>36</sup> Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear...” (1 Sam 17:34-36)

You had to be *Cobra Kai* to be a shepherd...

Fending off lions and bears.

“I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

“As I walk through life's darkest valleys...”—

As I wait for my mom/wife to recover;

As I walk with my daughter through her cancer treatments;

As I grieve the loss of my dad;

As I live in my loneliness;

As I wrestle with the fear of losing my job;

As I wait for the time when I'm reunited with my family;

As I work tirelessly trying to care for covid patients;

As I wrestle with doubts about decisions being made at government and church levels—

As I trudge, "I will not fear, for you are with me."

The Lord, our shepherd, is our protector.

He walks with us through the valley...

Ensuring that we're safe.

Keeping us protected in the shadow of his presence.

He holds up our faith even when we cannot.

He helps us work through doubts, through fears, and failing...

Grabbing tightly onto us even when we let him go.

The Lord is our protector...

Granting us victory over all of the enemies that come against us.

His power;

His provision;

His protection...

These are all to be found in the presence of the Lord.

All of these meet us in the midst of life's trials.

One more thing about this shepherd's presence...

**It pursues us.**

Surely your goodness and love will *follow me* all the days of my life.

"Follow" isn't a strong enough word here...

It's too tame and mild to convey the sense of the Hebrew word.

The word really means pursuing or chasing.

The goodness of God—

And the faithful love and mercy of God—

Pursues us...

Remaining with us for all time, wherever we go.

I don't like being chased—

I don't like that feeling in the pit of my stomach—

Because usually being chased is a bad thing.

Our girls right now like to play a game they call “roar.”

They like to be chased by us holding up our hands saying, “Roar!”

They run away screaming...

But if we stop, they notice that we're not there...

And ask for more.

They love being chased by us...

Knowing that we love them and are playing with them and are there for them.

They are being pursued by our love and care...

And they soak it up and want more.

In this life of on-going cycles of chaos and trials...this life of trudging...

With anxiety, illness, fears, doubts and conflict, forever attacking us...

I want to know that I'm being pursued by the goodness and faithful love of God.

I need to know that God is there wherever I go...

Always pursuing me...always present with me.

Leading me to places of rest, safety, and abundance in him...

Even as I walk through the darkest shadow valleys.

The overwhelming promise of God in Scripture is:

“Fear not, for I am with you.”

People of God, keep trudging.

For the Lord is with us.

And in his presence, we find:

His power;

His provision;  
His protection;  
And his constant pursuit.

Amen.