

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 8, 2022

“The LORD Is My Shepherd”
Psalms 23

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

I recently came across an account by the late James Mays, who was a marvellous scholar of the Psalms, about how he once encountered the 23rd Psalm, not—as you might expect—in his work as a biblical scholar but while hiking: “Once, while walking the Virginia mountains,” he recounted, “I came across a small family cemetery. It contained the graves of the family of a doctor who lived and worked in the area in the early 1800s. At the center of the graves a small four-sided obelisk stood with inscriptions on each face. As you walked around, it read, ‘The Lord is my shepherd’; then, ‘He restoreth my soul’; and next, ‘I will fear no evil’; and, finally, ‘I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.’ As I circled and read,” Mays recalled, “the awareness [grew] that these sentences were far more than decorative quotes [...]. It was as if I were listening to the doctor speaking, using the psalm to witness to his faith to anyone who, like me, chanced to pass by and stopped to read—and listen.”

Now perhaps this morning, we could also circle that obelisk, and slow down our steps to read and listen alongside. It’s a slightly disorienting approach, since those panels jump across the psalm in an idiosyncratic sort of way; however, when reading a psalm as familiar as this one, a bit of disorientation can be a good thing.

So let’s pause at that first panel: “The LORD is my shepherd” (v. 1). What do we learn from calling God ‘shepherd’? It’s clear enough what shepherding involves. As Mays himself explained elsewhere, “The primary duties of the shepherd’s vocation were provision and protection for the flock. The shepherd pastured the flock, led them in the right way when they had to move, fended off predators [...]. The sheep were [the shepherd’s] responsibility, and [the shepherd] was responsible for their welfare and safety.” That’s what a shepherd does (or should do); so what does this say about God, and our place before God?

For one, to call God ‘shepherd,’ is to ascribe to God these same roles—while also acknowledging that, in this metaphor, we’re the flock. That is, to say that God is shepherd is not only to say what we believe about God, but it’s also to say something important about ourselves, namely, that we’re the sheep in this metaphor, the ones who are unavoidably dependent on the shepherd. To call God our shepherd is to acclaim God’s compassionate care—but it’s also to acknowledge that we’re creatures who *need* a shepherd, who—without God, our shepherd—would be lost. In this way, the psalm moves us immediately to a posture of humility, to recognize that we deeply need the shepherding of God.

And to call God ‘shepherd’ also says something about ownership and rule, as sheep belong to the shepherd. As we heard in our first hymn, “we are *his* flock, he doth us feed, and for *his* sheep he doth us *take*” (Kethe). To call God ‘shepherd’ is say that we *belong* to this shepherd, that we belong to God. This might make us a bit uncomfortable, to think of ourselves as God’s property, particularly since we commonly harbour false notions about our supposed

independence or self-sufficiency; and yet the belief that we belong to God has long been viewed in the Christian tradition as a deep comfort and assurance. To take one example, the sixteenth-century Heidelberg Catechism opens by asking: “What is your only *comfort*, in life and in death?”—and the response begins, “That I *belong*—body and soul, in life and in death—not to my self but to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ.”

So now let’s take a few steps around that little obelisk, to read that second panel: “He restoreth my soul” (or “he restores my soul,” in our more modern version) (v. 3). I think when we hear the word ‘soul,’ we tend to think of something incorporeal, some intangible—almost abstract—spirit. There are reasons for that (it’s a long story, having to do with ancient Greek philosophy and its influence on the Christian tradition); however, in the Old Testament, in the Jewish Scriptures, ‘the soul’ was understood in more concrete and earthy ways. In Hebrew, the word here for ‘soul’ (נַפְשׁ) —that which is being ‘restored’ in this verse—that word means, ‘soul,’ ‘inner being’ or ‘person,’ sure; but it also means ‘that which breathes’ (Gesenius), and even ‘neck, throat’ (Pratico), the parts of our body that enable us to breathe and live. And so, this word that we translate ‘soul’ can also mean, quite simply, ‘life’ (Pratico, Gesenius). And that’s important, because this verse of the psalm isn’t about restoring some incorporeal soul (whatever that might mean); rather, this is about restoring *us*, as living, breathing, embodied people; this is about “refresh[ing our] being” (Dahood) and refreshing our life.

Now to affirm that God restores and refreshes our lives and our breath and our being, this should be deeply comforting; however, we may find that this comfort is elusive until we admit that we’re the sort of people who *need* to be refreshed and restored. Yet again, this psalm pushes us toward humility; we can hardly receive the comfort of this promise to restore us unless we admit that we need to be restored. Yet if we can acknowledge that we’re people who need to be restored, refreshed, repaired even—then we may be opened to the goodness of God who, as this psalm promises, can restore us to life.

And now we come around to the far side of that little obelisk, and read: “I will fear no evil” (or “I fear no evil”) (v. 4). I said that it’s a bit disorienting to approach the psalm like this, by reflecting on the panels of that fascinating little obelisk (and that’s helpful, with a familiar psalm like this)—but it’s nowhere more disorienting than here, where we read words that, taken alone, seem totally incomplete. To hear those words by themselves—“I will fear no evil”—it sounds like a melody left jarringly unresolved or a sentence that just doesn’t— You can *feel* that something’s missing, which is of course the psalmist’s reason for not fearing. Taken alone, “I will fear no evil” sounds like bravado or denial or inauthenticity... But of course, in the psalm, this confidence, this boast, emerges from the psalmist’s assurance in the presence of God: “I fear no evil; *for you are with me.*” What makes the psalmist stand up to fear is simply, and delightfully, the nearness of God.

Which brings us to the last panel of that obelisk, almost back to where we started: “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” or, in our translation, “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long” (v. 6). As the psalm ends, it “looks ahead confidently” (Charry) to life that will never cease to be in the God’s presence. This last verse can be read in different ways, as the different translations suggest. Some interpreters read “the house of the LORD” as God’s “heavenly dwelling” or “God’s celestial abode” (Dahood), whereas others understand this concretely as the Temple in Jerusalem (French); the ending literally means ‘length of days,’ but it can be read as “my whole life long” (NRSV) or “life eternal” or “days without end” (Dahood)

or “forever” (AV). But notice what’s constant, what doesn’t change, in these different readings of the poetry; whether the temple is heavenly or earthly, whether the “length of days” describes the days of this life or the days of life eternal—however this poetry is read, the psalm concludes with clear confidence that the psalmist will remain, unendingly, in the presence of God. And that is, in a way, what the whole psalm is about: life in the presence of God, the shepherd who makes these promises come alive.

It’s quite a remarkable story, how one of the great scholars of the Psalms encountered the 23rd Psalm silently, on a hike; and I’ve tried, this morning, to let us share imaginatively in his experience of circling the psalm in the mountains of Virginia. But just before we take leave of that obelisk, perhaps we could circle it silently just once more? So how about this time I’ll just read those panels aloud, and we can pause in silence, and allow these pieces of the psalm to speak to us:

‘The Lord is my shepherd’...

‘He restoreth my soul’...

‘I will fear no evil’...

‘I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever’...

Amen.