

The Green Grass of Home

Along with the Lord's Prayer, John 3:16, and the beginning of Genesis, the Twenty-third Psalm is one of the most recognizable pieces of scripture in all of western civilization. I would guess that most people here today could recite it without prompting and the rest of us could only need a little help to say these famous words (at least in the King James Version). There have been dozens of musical settings of this psalm in sacred and popular music from Brahms to Vaughn Williams to Bobby McFerrin. There have also been paraphrases of the psalm and re-imaginings of it in poetry and hymns by George Herbert and Isaac Watts among others. There have even been some profane versions of the psalm, especially among soldiers, it is that well-known.

I think that many people find the meter and pace soothing. Perhaps also because it is so familiar it is comforting. I wonder in our post-agricultural era what meaning people take away from the psalm. After all, very few of us have any but the most peripheral experiences with sheep. We wear wool clothing but we are not engaged in the shearing of sheep or the spinning of wool. Some people knit but the wool comes from a shop. Additionally, very few of us know a shepherd so why would we take comfort in saying the Lord is my shepherd?

Let us look at the psalm in depth and perhaps we will come away with a deeper appreciation for what it can mean for us besides the familiar and the comfortable.

In the very first phrase every word is vitally important. The words "The LORD" as presented here, that is in all caps, indicates that the Hebrew word behind it is the proper name of God, YHWH or the Tetragrammaton. Usually pronounced Yahweh, this is not a generic word for God such as god or lord. This is God's proper name as revealed to Moses from the burning bush. The psalmist is speaking of a very specific god and claiming that god, YHWH, as his very own shepherd. This relationship is intimate. We know each other by name.

Furthermore, the verb "is" indicates that a present relationship; not one that is past or future. I use the word "my" not "our." The word "my" indicates that the psalmist is staking a personal claim on this shepherd and the shepherd has staked a claim on him. This is not your shepherd or our shepherd or their shepherd, but mine.

Speaking of shepherds, they are special within the Middle Eastern culture. There was a trend about 20 years ago to speak of shepherds as the lowest of the low, in sermons, especially around Christmas. Preachers wanted to make the point that these lowly ones were the first to receive a celestial message about the Messiah's birth and then to visit Jesus in the manger. The problem is that shepherds were by no means the lowest of the low. If they were so low God would not describe Godself as a shepherd nor would Jesus say "I am the good shepherd." Indeed, shepherding was an important and honorable profession. Sheep and goats unlike cattle can graze in the hilly and rocky terrain of Israel. They were not just a source of wool but also food. Even today you are much more likely to eat lamb or goat in Israel than you are beef.

What follows in the second phrase is rather remarkable. The psalmist says "I shall not want." There is no object of the word want. The psalmist does not say I shall not want for food or drink or clothing. The psalmist is saying I will never want for anything. I know this shepherd by name and he takes care of my every need or want.

The next two verses are focused on what God does for us. Note that these are in the second person. The psalmist tells us that “He” sets us down in green pastures and takes us to living water. But it is not just the necessities that God takes care of. This shepherd God also restores our souls and leads us in paths of righteousness. Being cared for by this shepherd takes care of our physical and spiritual needs.

The middle of the psalm is where it turns dark for a moment. We hear that the shepherd leads the sheep through the dark valley. This alludes to the darkness that comes into our lives. These are the times we feel as if we are about to die. Despite this darkness we do not need to fear for the shepherd is with us. The very tools of the shepherd’s trade, the rod and staff, are a comfort to us. The rod is the tool that the shepherd uses to defend the sheep from predators. The staff is the tool the shepherd uses to keep the sheep together; the crook can snag the sheep that wanders.

In the next verse there is a dramatic change as the psalmist speaks to the shepherd directly, saying thou which in Elizabethan English is the informal version of you. That is, you, the God who is familiar and close to me prepares a table for me even in the midst of my enemies. You anoint me with oil and my cup overflows. Even when I might be surrounded by those that want to do me harm, the shepherd is preparing a feast for me and anointing me, and my cup never is empty.

Finally, the psalmist seems to realize the magnitude of the shepherd’s love and care. This good shepherd, YHWH, guards me, protects me, feeds me, shelters me, and even when all is dark and I am surrounded by my enemies, the shepherd sets a feast for me, and anoints me. The psalmist realizes, “If all this can happen, then God’s goodness and mercy must be **pursuing me** (a better translation than follows me) all of my life. I will live in God’s house, which is the Temple, for all eternity.”

If you are smarter than me, and I do not doubt that you are, you may have figured this out for yourself. If you are like me it would take intentional deconstruction and reconstruction of this psalm to get at this deeper sense of who the shepherd is and what the shepherd does and how blessed I truly am for being in the care of the shepherd, YHWH.

We cannot expect this from any other shepherd. We cannot imagine that money, earthly power, influential friends, possessions, IRAs, stocks, or anything else of the world can be to me what the LORD my shepherd is. We can flee from the flock and we can look for greener pastures, but they do not exist. What is without God is like a mirage, ephemeral and nothing. Do not just pray the 23rd Psalm; live into it. It points to the life-giving love that all seek, but too few find. Here it is as short as a greeting card, easily learned by heart, and worth cherishing all the days of our life.