

“Radical Trust and the Challenges of Life”

May 11, 2025

Psalm 23

For all of its pre-modern imagery of sheep and shepherds, rod and staff, the Twenty-third Psalm still speaks words of comfort to us today. It assures us of the strong presence of God even at the far edges of life.

While these words are often read in hospitals and at funerals, we miss the power of this psalm if we confine its use to such places and occasions. These words also speak to us as we face the *mystery of life*. The psalm addresses us in our everyday situations of eating, drinking, and seeking security. In the common, familiar activities of life, we are also assured of the strong presence of God.

For a few minutes this morning, then, let’s walk through this Psalm together.

The first nine words are deceptively simple: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

With those words we make a statement of faith that is contrary to so much in our culture.

In the ancient world, kings were thought of as the shepherds of their people. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God speaks against the shepherd kings who mistreated the people and promises that God will become the good shepherd. To say “The Lord is my shepherd,” is to declare loyalty to the living God above all other rulers and powers who would lay claim to our allegiance.

In doing so, we begin to see all that we have, all that we are as a gift from God. We affirm: “I shall not want.”

Another translation is: “I lack nothing.” These words speak of abundance.

I invite you—as an individual cared for by the Good Shepherd—to open yourself to seeing that ancient reality at work in your own life.

If by the eyes of faith we see that life itself is pure *gift*, then generosity and gratitude begin to flow easily and readily, even when markets plummet.

From the place of fear, we are led to gratitude.

From the place of selfishness, we are led to extravagant generosity.¹

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

“God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside still water; God restores my soul.”

Life depends on God, the psalmist tells us. Life depends solely on God.

We can sense the Shepherd's careful providing for all things: the food and drink of green pastures and still waters. To speak these words is to affirm that God "restores my soul," or better translated, God "keeps me alive."

We find life in the care of the shepherd God who gives us rest.

Somewhere I heard a story about Albert Einstein's sailing style. He would get in his boat and just sit there, looking at the water, drifting here and there in the harbor. All the other boats were zipping around him, tacking back and forth. There in the midst of this was Einstein—a calm, restful presence.

Most of us? Well, we're no Einsteins. We're going faster and faster all the time. We seem to have lost the power to relax.

The good shepherd "makes me lie down." Maybe that is one of the purposes of weariness—to make us lie down, to rest when on our own we would not.

Walk beside still waters. Lie down in green pastures.

Let your soul be restored.

Let your drooping spirit be revived.

Let God keep you alive.

Let God keep you fully, abundantly alive.

Now, it might seem from the opening words of this Psalm that those under the care of the Shepherd God have got it made. We hear: "I have everything I need." We see images of green pastures and still waters.

The easy life.

But all of this is for a purpose: "God leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

Kathleen Norris says that "at its root, in Hebrew, the word [righteous] means "one whose aim is true."²

Righteousness describes a relationship. Whatever upholds a relationship—acts of faithfulness, love, understanding, trustworthiness—whatever upholds a relationship is righteous. Unrighteous acts break the covenants we make with each other and with God.

The "paths of righteousness" are the ways of restoring relationships, healing brokenness, working for justice in the public arena.

Along the "paths of righteousness," we come to what has been called the "structural and theological center of the psalm"—those confident words: "Even though I walk through

the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

Do you notice the change here? The psalmist moves away from talking *about* God—God leads me, God guides me, God restores my soul. Now the psalmist starts talking *to* God—“*You* are with me.” For the rest of the psalm, the language is personal. The words become a direct address to the living and present God.

These words speak to us of God’s presence as we face the mystery of death. These words speak certainty in the presence of the greatest uncertainty. Each of us dies as an individual, but the psalmist tells us we do not die by ourselves.

This is one of the great and comforting hopes that we have: that as our lives come to an end we are not alone. The One who gives us life, who guides us on right paths, will still be there as we walk the way unknown to each of us but common to all.

That is a wonderful affirmation.

And as we listen carefully, we discover that God is with us not only in our dying but also in our living.

Joseph Sittler was a Lutheran theologian who, in the years before his death, lost his eyesight—but not his insight. He recalled *listening* those words and *hearing* something that he’d never heard before.

“The text does not speak of the valley of death but the valley of the *shadow* of death...The psalm suggests that *even while we live*, the assured future arrival of the death casts a shadow over us...The wonderful truth is that God is with us now. It is not simply that God will be with us in the experience of death itself; it is that God will walk with us through all of life, a life over which death sometimes casts its shadow.”³

So it is said that God accompanies us in the sorrow, in the suffering, in the confronting of illness and death and tragedy that are also part of the fabric of our lives.⁴

Each of us can say: “In the valley of the *shadow of death*, you, O God, are with me.”

God is with us in our living.

God is with us even when our living is difficult.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

As this psalm moves toward its conclusion, the image of God changes from shepherd to that of host. The shepherd is the protector of the sheep and also the protector of travelers who find hospitality in the tent from danger and enemies.

Now if that seems a little too strong, perhaps you would prefer the translation that speaks of a table “in the presence of those who trouble me.” Someone once told me that he didn’t think of having a lot of “enemies,” but “people who trouble” him? Sure.

You know what he means, don’t you? And the psalmist suggests that even in the midst of the irritations and aggravations of life God is spreading out a feast of good things.

Can we open our eyes and our hearts enough to see everything that is being offered?

Find your place at the table of abundance even in the presence of those who trouble you.

The God who is the good shepherd is also the God of abundant generosity. In listening to the psalmist we discover the God who is lavish with gifts, whose grace is sufficient for all our needs. We see—first in sketchy outline, then in remarkable clarity and detail—the God who generously gives to us.

Remember how this psalm ends? “I will dwell in the house of the Lord *forever*.”

I read this at funerals as a word of hope—an affirmation that eternity is in God’s hands and that we are in God’s eternity. Forever.

It’s true that the better translation of the Hebrew words of the psalm is “I will dwell in the house of the Lord *for all my days*.” The original author was not speaking about life after death so much as abiding in the temple of God in Jerusalem as long as this life remained. And yet, as we hear these words in the light of the resurrection, they give us a hint of eternity.

We long for that which is lasting. Even when we are strong and fleet of foot and nimble of mind, we know that life is not “forever.” While we live, we walk “through the valley of the shadow of death.”

The person who “dwells in the house of the Lord” is the one who worships and serves the living God.

The psalmist struggles to picture what it means to live by a radical trust in God in the midst of uncertainty, enmity, and death—some of the greatest challenges of life. This trust will carry us through our darkest hours in our living and in our dying. This trust empowers us to believe that life has meaning, even though our immediate experience may be telling us otherwise. This trust empowers us to set out in new directions when life calls for change.

We belong to God, who cares and provides for us.

We belong to God, who challenges and provokes us.

In our living and in our dying, we belong to God, the good shepherd.

¹ NIB Exodus 35-36.

² Page: 2

Kathleen Norris *Amazing Grace* pg. 97.

³ Martin Marty, *Context*, August 1 & 15, 1984, quoted in Richard Wing, *3;00 a.m.: Meditations for the Middle of the Night*, pg. 49-50.

⁴ Diana Eck in Laufer and Lewis, *Inspired*, pg. 56-57.