

Comfort Psalm Redacs

Psalm 23

(The Psalmist considers the comfort a Shepherd gives the sheep and likens that to God's care for humans.)

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For most of my life I was so attuned to the phrase, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” that I thought of this psalm as intended mostly for funerals. In fact, our family—like many—read this psalm at our mother’s memorial service. Now I see that the psalm is an affirmation of the goodness of life and a statement of unconditional trust in God to keep us safe from harm. It’s filled with images of immense comfort and safety—for the LIVING.

Green pastures, still waters, not wanting for anything, a restored soul, no fear, anointment with oil, assurance of goodness and mercy every day of our lives, forever. What comfort—for living.

I hope that you will **bathe in the comfort** of this psalm this morning. I hope for something else, too—that you **think a about God and humans... that you ponder, “What is our relationship to God?” Not so much, “Are we like sheep?” as, “If God were Shepherd-like, what does that mean for humanity?”**

I’d like to make an editorial note—a footnote, except I don’t know how to make a footnote out loud. In the Hebrew Bible there are several names used for God in the original language. Different writers who had slightly different understandings of God called God either Yahweh or Elohim. In general, Yahweh is the God-term used by writers who thought of God more like a person, even a person who walks along observing things on earth, while Elohim is the God-term used by those who thought of God as more abstract. The people centuries later who translated these terms for God into English tended to translate “Yahweh” into “Lord,” probably because that seemed more personal, and “Elohim” into “God,” I guess because that seemed more abstract. “The Lord is My Shepherd...” which we say in English was, in Hebrew, “Yahweh is My Shepherd. . .” For the Hebrews that meant, “God is My Shepherd...”

A friend of mine who is a Hebrew Bible scholar pointed out that this *psalm is told entirely from a sheep’s perspective. Before he mentioned this, I had not realized that, had you?*

Think about it, how often do we humans lie down in green pastures? We might enjoy lying on the grass in our backyards, but green pastures? Would those images of green pastures and still waters come first to your mind to name comfort for you? We might long for cozy beds and for good friends, but pastures and still water? No. Sheep would long, if they long at all, for those things.

“The valley of the shadow of death” in Palestine was a natural valley south of Jericho leading from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea. It was a very narrow path through a mountain range. But it was necessary for shepherds to take their sheep through that valley to get to the feeding ground. The side walls of the valley were over 1500 feet high in

places and the journey was about 4 1/2 miles long. To make things a bit more complex, the footing on the path was solid rock and so narrow in many places that the sheep could not turn around. Because of this there was an unwritten code in ancient days that the flocks would go up the valley in the morning and down toward eventide—otherwise, can you imagine the confusion when two flocks would meet?¹

During Christmas pageants, we make sure our shepherds carry rods with a crook at the end, and we eat candy canes to represent those crooks. The purpose of these crooks is to catch any sheep that start to fall off the edge. The crook would encircle the sheep's neck as the Shepherd assisted the animal to safety.

In an article of the *Saturday Evening Post*, A Basque herder named Ferdinando DeAlfonso hypothesized about one of the most puzzling lines of this psalm, “in the presence of my enemies.” This shepherder explained what he thought were “the enemies”—poisonous plants! There were a variety of plants that were fatal to grazing animals around the Holy Land. DeAlfonso explains that the shepherds were constantly on guard for those poisonous plants in the feeding grounds. The shepherd would dig out every stalk. The sheep were led to their newly prepared table—their pasture. In the presence of their enemy plants, they ate in peace.

This psalm #23 is a comfort psalm, for the living.

There's something about this psalm that invites translations, remakes, thinking from other perspectives. Check the internet, if you want, and you'll find dozens of paraphrases, translations, and musical renditions. Members of our Wednesday evening class this past May and June wrote such redacted versions—we're surrounding ourselves with those in our worship today, and I thank the authors for allowing their reflections to be shared with us all. I encourage you to enjoy writing your own psalm redaction.

There is so much interest in this psalm mostly because it leads to comfort, a sense of security and trust in God. The beautiful poetry of this psalm may make less obvious something else about the psalm—it provides a powerful statement about God.

The theology of this psalm, I think, is what we *want* to believe about God and how *we believe God wants* to be with us. It is reasonable to think of God as providing, restoring, caring for us in the narrow passages of our lives, helping us not to fear needlessly, and to always, always with us.

Yet, clearly, everyone around the world does not have enough food and some people live with a lot of fear, given our current human relations and based upon our current *heart-capacities*.

When we say this psalm, then, **are we** stating observable facts, knowledge of what is genuinely occurring for all humans, or are we **praying** that all this be so? If this psalm is a prayer, that all this comfort and security that is imaged so vividly **be** so, then what lies between our prayer and the full comfort and security pictured in this psalm for all people in the world?

Luvi sang our Lord's Prayer today. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer, not a statement about the observable experience of all people. We say: “Thy will be done, give us this day our daily bread, and lead us not into temptation...”

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer—it expresses our wants, and what we genuinely believe is possible, between God and humans. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we do not say, “I have bread,” or “All people have bread.” We pray that all have bread. We

don't say in the Lord's Prayer that no one is tempted to do something unwise; we pray that we not be tempted to behave unwisely.

This is not quite the case with the wording of the 23rd Psalm. The words all sound more definite, like a fact. We speak of Shepherd God who does catch us with the staff if we slip off the path. We speak of Shepherd God who anoints all our scratches.

Think of this. Wonderful Shepherds might have a 99% success rate, but no matter how loving or attentive the Shepherd is, even sheep, which are often ridiculed as following along without thought, have freedom. The Shepherd God does not tether sheep all together as we see some Kindergartners holding onto a string when on a field trip.

The past few days I have come to think of the 23rd Psalm more as a poetic prayer, based on a belief about what is **possible for God and humans**—all of us humans, together.

When we say the 23rd Psalm, we are praying. We trust that Shepherd God is present, helpful, observant, powerful to help, and always here. Then we add the human component. We certainly are not sheep; in fact sometimes we are insulted if any such comparison is made. We human beings have the capacity for more delight than sheep. We have the capacity even to imagine ourselves to be sheep. (Sheep don't seem to be able to imagine themselves as humans.)

One of our most obvious human characteristics is freedom, freedom to act or not and to love and care for others in varying degrees.

All creatures have freedom; God's creation is not a big puppet stage. Yet humans have the most freedom—and responsibility.

Even the most experienced and loving Shepherd isn't able to spare every lamb from every possible difficulty. Similarly, God cannot spare every human from all we humans can collectively get ourselves into. Yet, I believe God is trying so darn hard. Every step we take, God is trying to keep **us**—and all other humans—on paths of wisdom. Every health hazard there is God is trying to get **our** attention to weed out the dangers. The goal is not to abandon worry completely—after all, we were created with the potential to worry. The goal is to be guided by any worry toward wisdom about what to do. The goal would be not to let fear immobilize us or to push us to feel distant from others—including God.

Right now some of our own church members are experiencing various kinds of suffering. Around the world, there is war, poverty, and pain in plenty of places. Every scratch isn't healed by Shepherd God's anointing oil as every individual goes to sleep at night. God, I believe, **wants** to protect and help us all, and **is** helping us, but God does not have an invisible rod and staff that can intervene to catch our every fall.

Puzzling over this, I realized that the 23 Psalm is written, or at least comes through the centuries to us in the singular. "I shall not want." Whereas, the Lord's Prayer is the prayer of the community, "Give **us** this day **our** daily bread." This is so, even though the image of Shepherd evokes the idea of a whole flock of sheep. There may be personal trainers, but I've never heard of a personal Shepherd. We pray the "**Our** Father," whereas with the psalm, we say, "The Lord is **my** shepherd."

Perhaps I'm seeing through the eyes of this visionary congregation that is dedicated to feeding hungry and showering homeless; perhaps I'm celebrating our congregations' commitment to children through the Epworth Academy, Vacation Bible School and Mission Trips—so that upcoming generations gain a genuine sense of

community. Perhaps I'm grateful that we as nations together seem to be facing and tackling big issues together; perhaps I'm thinking things like if "Nothing But Nets" can prevent malaria, then certainly, also, all could have enough food. Perhaps I'm caught up in Jesus' vision that became a prayer that became a command—whatever it is, I'm thinking we are called today to start praying this Comfort Psalm from a plural perspective. Shepherd God wants to provide comfort and security, for me, **and** also for "us."

The Lord is OUR Shepherd, WE shall not want. ...God leads US in right paths...Even though WE walk through difficult challenges to feed everyone, to free everyone, to be respectful of our earth, to get along with each other without wars... WE fear no evil... for You are with US.... your rod and your staff, they comfort US.

Thinking of God as Shepherd is even better than I had realized. For, the Shepherd, while caring about every single lamb simultaneously watches out for and makes decisions for the whole.

What transforms this psalm from a personal comfort psalm, helping me in my own personal challenges, into a psalm for this very moment in human history, is the added dimension that Jesus called "love" or a "transformation of our hearts" or what we might describe as a shift to a "community identity." Somehow, this psalm is a call upon us to act like the humans we are, with God's gentle help. In contrast to sheep, how wonderful—we are able to mend each others' scratches and to work so well together that, with God's guidance, not only "I shall not want," but also, "No one shall want." What comfort that would be! Amen.

ⁱ "Beside Still Waters," by Dr. Carl Stanley. *The Saturday Evening Post*, March/April 2002, 32? 84-86