

The Lord is my Shepherd

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[0 : 00] St. John's Shaughnessy Church Our psalm this morning is Psalm 23 and it will help you as always if you have your Bibles open at that place.

I want to begin with a quote from a book by a Jewish author. How can great wisdom care so little about the torments of innocent creatures?

This question, which began to agonize me when I was six or seven years old, still haunts me today. I still cannot accept the ruthlessness of nature, God the absolute.

How can a merciful God allow all this to happen and keep silent? A quote is from Isaac Singer, who wrote a book in 1985 entitled Love and Exile.

And he articulates one of the great human questions. Not so much, is there a God? Because many people will say they believe in God. All the opinion polls that are taken suggest that.

[1 : 38] That's not really the question, I think. The great question is, is God good? Or to put this a different way, is God for us or against us?

The book of Psalms that lies at the center of our attention in this series itself raises that question again and again in all those many psalms which lament God's absence or God's silence in the face of human suffering.

There is, as we've seen, a brutal honesty in these psalms about the way things often are in the world. And we've already seen that in Psalm 137 last week.

It's most famously demonstrated in a psalm that we shall look at in a few weeks' time, Psalm 22, which begins, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Words that Jesus takes upon his lips on the cross and words which evidently, therefore, are as Christian as they are Jewish.

[2 : 45] We are not called as Christians to ignore human reality, to pretend it is otherwise than we find it. We are called rather to look it in the face and to pray about it as these psalmists prayed about it, frankly, openly and with intensity.

Is God for us or against us? The book of psalms itself suggests an answer to this question by following that famous Psalm 22, uttered by somebody who feels himself forsaken by God, with Psalm 23.

After the long lament of Psalm 22, and after, in our series, we've looked at the gut-wrenching Psalm 137, we find here in Psalm 23 one of the jewels of the Psalter, a psalm of confidence, as it is usually described, because it expresses confidence as to the character of God, a God who is good, a God who looks after his people, even in the midst of horrendous circumstances, the circumstances of exile, in which the kingdom of God has not yet fully come.

And this psalm speaks about God in this context, using two images. First of all, the image of the Good Shepherd, and secondly, the image of the welcoming and attentive host.

Here is the God who walks with us even through the darkest valley, and who blesses us even in the midst of oppression and persecution. And so I want to go through the psalm with you, more or less verse by verse this morning, since it is quite brief, and to draw out what we can learn about God from this psalm.

[4 : 41] So let's begin by looking at verses 1 to 3. The Lord, we are told, is a good shepherd. The shepherd is a widespread image for the king in the ancient world.

It's an image that represents leadership and providing for his people. And as such, it is a fairly common metaphor for God as well.

Very closely associated with God's leading Israel in the wilderness. Lots of texts bring the shepherd imagery and the wilderness imagery together. It's also very much bound up in Isaiah 40 through 55 with the return from exile.

God will once again act like a shepherd for his people in bringing them back out of exile. And so along with images like rock and shield used elsewhere in the Psalms, we have this more intimate image of the shepherd who lives with his flock and is everything to it.

A good shepherd, of course, makes sure that the sheep eat the best food. And we are introduced to that idea in the psalm in the reference to the green pastures, the grassy meadows, the sort of vegetation that is opposed to wilderness.

[6 : 06] Much of Palestine, of course, much of the ancient world was fairly sparsely vegetated. But here the emphasis lies on abundance and indeed lushness, on God's all-year-round care, which means, of course, that God is providing for his sheep even in the dry season.

So here we have a God who is able to overcome even those parts of life which are themselves, naturally speaking, dry. We are told that God leads his sheep alongside quiet waters where they can refresh themselves by drinking.

And if we are to think of the alternative to that, we may think of the turbulent waters that the Psalms often speak about, the waters that crash against the foundations of the city of God and seek to overcome God's people.

Well, the waters that God leads his sheep, his people beside, are not the turbulent waters of chaos where the sheep who stick their head in get swept away. These are quiet waters and can be drunk with safety.

The Good Shepherd, we are told, also restores the soul. Verse 3. Or perhaps a better translation would be, he restores my life.

[7 : 28] Because in the Bible, the soul is not so much a separate bit of who we are, it's simply one of the ways in which we may look at the human being.

So we don't so much have souls, biblically speaking, we are souls. So when the Psalm says, he restores my soul, it simply means he revives me.

He brings me back to life. The phrase itself is slightly ambiguous. It may refer simply to keeping the sheep alive through good care, putting life back into them when it's ebbing away through lack of food and water.

We might translate it then, he refreshes me. In this case, we are still exploring what it means that the sheep lack nothing. Another alternative is to understand the phrase as referring to the role of the shepherd in guiding the sheep on their journey, which is where we're going to be going shortly in verses 3 and 4.

That is, God restores life in the sense of fetching the sheep back onto the right path when they stray. The verb restore here is often used in Hebrew of turning back to God in repentance.

[8 : 46] And so we might have the idea of God drawing us back onto the path when we stray. Certainly by the second part of verse 3, we have turned away to consider the way in which the good shepherd not only provides for the sheep, but also guides the sheep so that indeed they do stay on these right paths, the paths of righteousness, and do not stray off these paths into dangerous places.

And we are told here in the psalm that God is with his people even when there is a need to travel through a dangerous place, even where the sheep must travel through the darkest valley or ravine where threats may lurk in the shadows.

The fuller phrase that we're familiar with, of course, the valley of the shadow of death, refers to one of those threats, perhaps the ultimate one, the threat of death, and yet again it's perhaps not the best way to render the phrase because to translate it that way tends to focus our attention only on one of the many threats that we experience in life rather than on the many threats that we may encounter.

And in the Hebrew, to speak in this way of the valley of the shadow of death is simply a particularly graphic way of expressing a superlative, expressing the idea of intensity and greatness.

And so we may just want to translate it here, not the valley of the shadow of death, but perhaps something like the deepest, darkest valley. God is with us whenever we go through valleys like that, of course, including death, but not exclusively so.

[10 : 32] Now, of course, most sheep in ancient Palestine, as now, spend much of their time on sunlit hills where there is grass and so on, but every so often sheep must go on a journey, and we are told here that the good shepherd does not simply look after his sheep in the pleasant places, but also in the unpleasant places, because sometimes he has to move his flock, and in the moving of them, he must sometimes take them through dark places.

And he doesn't just shoo them on there and say, goodbye, I'll meet you on the other side. He goes through the dark valley with them, because, of course, there is in life no way of getting where we're going without sometimes encountering dark places.

We've already seen that in some of our lament psalms. There is no path to the city of God that does not pass through dark valleys, and any theology which says otherwise is, by biblical standards, a completely false theology.

The shepherd is committed to his guiding task. In fact, we are told in the psalm that he has bound himself by name to this flock.

His reputation, his good name as shepherd, is bound up with his success in carrying out this task of guidance.

[12:02] He cannot be a good shepherd if he is not able to carry out the tasks that a good shepherd carries out. And so, we are told here that God guides his flock not just because he cares about us, but because he has made certain commitments to us.

We are bound up with his reputation. And so, as a good shepherd, he is always there with the sheep. It is his presence that encourages the sheep to fear no evil, even in the darkest place. And one of the reasons we do not fear any evil is because this shepherd is armed. He has with him a rod and a staff. The rod was a cudgel worn at the belt.

The staff was used for walking along, of course, but also keeping the sheep in line. And so, this shepherd is well armed and well able to fight off all the wild animals that might threaten the flock. He is able to do so. He is certainly willing to do so. And so, you can see that the good shepherd is the perfect companion for our journey.

[13:16] Because whatever befalls us, we know for a surety that he is with us. As we reflect then on these opening verses and sum them up, we see that they are saying to us that God is our leader and the one who provides us with all we need.

He provides us with an ordered world in which we can experience his blessing. We can rest and be quiet. We do not need to inhabit the chaotic and wild world around us.

We read also that this is a God who when we do stray from the path seeks us out and guides us back into the right way, who is with us even in the darkest valleys of our experience, including the valley of death.

Wherever he leads us, we can be sure of his protection and ultimate care. And being sure of this, we can be comforted. We need fear, no evil.

In the second part of the psalm, the imagery changes suddenly. And now we read not of God as good shepherd, but of God as a generous, attentive host.

[14:36] Perhaps we are to picture the pilgrim now as having moved on in his journey, and having arrived at his destination. The picture is complicated, though, because even at this destination, we read still in verse 5 of enemies.

We may have moved on metaphorically from journey to destination, but this is a world in which there are still threats. And in this world, God is represented a risk-taking host, or at least, a host who does not care too much for public opinion.

And so, as we come to the closing verses of the psalm, we read that God welcomes the psalmist into his home, even though the psalmist is not highly regarded and is indeed hated by many of those who see what is happening.

We are to imagine here somebody arriving on a journey at a house and being welcomed in when all around there are onlookers who are reviling him and resenting this activity on the part of the host. It is, we are told, an exceedingly warm welcome. It is symbolized by the anointing of oil. The references to olive oil, a highly valued commodity in Israel which often appears in Old Testament context as symbolic of great wealth or great blessing or great luxury.

[16:17] For example, it appears in the book of Job associated with the enormous blessing that Job had known as that book opens. It often appears in the Psalms as a luxury item associated with others which have to do with appearances rather than with simply sustenance.

This is why its use in anointing symbolizes something important. If you read the Bible and you see lots of anointings here and there of kings and priests and so on, you will begin to get the idea that anointing is something which symbolizes an exceedingly important person or event.

A king or a priest or in this case in our psalm a most honoured and welcome guest. The pilgrim finds a warm welcome from God at the end of his journey.

He is treated as the most honoured of guests. Of course, not to get too romantic about it, you understand that since the oil was characteristically mixed with perfumes, one of the purposes of the oil was also to kill off the fragrances arising from the journey.

Another sign of this great welcome is the wonderful banquet that is organised for this pilgrim. God prepares a table.

[17 : 45] He sets out a feast for this psalmist and it is indeed an abundant feast because we are told his cup brims to overflowing with wine and wine is another luxury item in the Bible associated often with oil.

This is a truly festive occasion. The psalmist may be despised in the world outside but here within the house of God he is honoured and welcomed and enjoys extravagant hospitality.

And you might think that he might just be happy to be there on this one occasion but he tells us in verse 6 that he expects this state of affairs rather to continue all the days of his life.

And that of course is because the character of the host is fixed and sure. The host has integrity. He will not turn his back on his friends.

He will not tire of their company. He will not give them a meal on one occasion and then turf them out of the door on the other. The psalmist is convinced he will always know God's goodness because God is always good even while he is sometimes dangerous.

[19 : 06] And in addition to God's goodness the psalmist says he will know God's steadfast love. In fact he says these things will pursue him.

Now often in Bible translations that is translated simply with the weaker follow him. But in fact this verb is most often used of wild animals hunting down their prey.

And so it's a very strong image. Goodness and steadfast love will hunt the psalmist down.

Sometimes I think we in our insecurity are a bit more like Frodo looking over his shoulder for Gollum somewhere in the distance in the Lord of the Rings.

things. We know about God's steadfast love and goodness but we're constantly checking over our shoulder to check that they're still there somewhere. The psalm says no not at all you will not have to look back in the road to find God's steadfast love and goodness.

They're going to be poised just around your jugular vein. They are hunting you down. They are not tagging along lamely in the far distance.

[20 : 17] God's love and mercy breathe down our necks. And of course that is why the psalmist wants to dwell so badly in God's house forever.

He wants to be where God is. Who would not? Given the character of this God. He wants to stay where he is loved and honoured and cared for and provided for and where there is this wonderful person actively pursuing him with grace and steadfast love.

It's a wonderful picture of who God is. God views us as a host, views his honoured guest. We are welcomed extravagantly into his home.

We are invited to his banqueting table to enjoy all the good things that he has prepared for us. He pursues us with goodness and steadfast love.

Let me return to my initial question. Is God for us? Yes, the Bible replies, God is for us, even when our circumstances may sometimes suggest otherwise.

[21 : 29] Psalm 23 already tells us this, and the New Testament, when it picks up this imagery, underlines the message for us. Because the New Testament tells us of a moment in human time, when the Good Shepherd came among us in Jesus.

Jesus, who saw the crowds and had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, Matthew chapter 9.

Jesus, who instructed his disciples to go out and preach to these lost sheep of Israel. Jesus, who told a story about a lost sheep to explain his mission.

Jesus, who in John chapter 10, tells us himself that he is indeed the Good Shepherd, just in case we have found it difficult to get it through our thick skulls by that point.

The New Testament also tells us of a Jesus who hung out with sinners, who ate and drank with them in the midst of his enemies. And in spite of rumors to the contrary, I do not believe that was grape juice that Jesus was drinking.

[22 : 38] Jesus, who spoke of a great banquet at the end of time, to which everyone who loves God will be welcome. Many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Just as the parable of the prodigal son, which follows the parable of the lost sheep in Luke's gospel, tells us of a banquet in celebration of a lost son who has come home.

And I think there's a strong possibility that Luke had in his mind Psalm 23 when he was putting these two parables side by side. Both images of shepherd and host are picked up in the final book of the New Testament in Revelation chapter 7 verses 14 to 17 where we are faced with an interesting paradox, the lamb who is also the shepherd, ensuring that his people never again hunger or thirst.

Revelation 7 14 I said to him, Sir, you know, and he said to me, these are they who have come out of the great tribulation, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God and serve him day and night within his temple and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more neither thirst any more.

[24 : 04] the sun shall not strike them nor any scorching heat. For the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

A wonderful biblical paradox. Is God with us? Yes. He is on the path with us that he asks us to walk. He is taking us to a wonderful destination and as somebody famous once said if God is for us who can be against us?

If neither death nor life nor angels nor demons neither the present nor the future nor any powers neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of this God then what can harm us on our journey?

We are blessed pilgrims indeed. as we journey on our way. Let us encourage each other with these thoughts as we go on together and let us encourage each other particularly to think truly and biblically of God rather than to give in to our suspicions and our insecurity and the cynicism of our age.

God the Bible tells us is good you can depend on it. Amen. This digital audio file along with many others is available from the St.

[25 : 41] John's Shaughnessy website at www.StJohns On the website you will also find information about ministries, worship services and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.

We hope that this message has helped you, and that you will share it with others.