

THE GOD WHO NURTURES

John 10: 22-30
Psalm 23

Faith Community
April 25, 2010

Introduction

The twenty third Psalm is one of the best-known and most loved passages in the Bible. Many people have it memorized it. It is so loved because it speaks of God as a shepherd who protects, nurtures, and guides. Don't all of us want someone like that? This is a Psalm about trust – our trust in God and trust that God cares for us.

Today a shepherd isn't an image that we connect with quite as well as it was in Old Testament times. The image in today's world might be something like a bodyguard, a guide (especially in a foreign country), or a host. Maybe a shepherd is like all three of those rolled together. He protects his sheep; he leads them away from danger; he offers them open fields and the water they need.

I

The Psalm begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Because God is like a shepherd to us, we have all that we need. Our spiritual longings are fulfilled. For some reason we always seem to be looking for something more. We want bigger, better, or more of what we already have. I have a book on my shelf that I am anxious to read. I bought it because of the title: *Longing for Enough in a Culture of More*. Why aren't we satisfied with enough?

Part of what the Psalm says is that with God we have enough – whether we are wealthy or poor, famous or unknown. The most important part of life is in place.

When we were in Honduras and Guatemala we met so many people who had very little to live on and yet appreciated having enough. They were hard working, but relaxed. I remember having real difficulty leaving Honduras because life there was much more peaceful and sensible. People weren't always pushing to get ahead of other people. They knew about having enough.

Several years ago we were able to go to Scotland. We stopped at Sheila's cousin's home there on our way to visit the eastern side of Scotland. As we stood visiting with him, we mentioned all the other places we were planning to see in Scotland that day. He looked at us in astonishment. He said, "You are so American; you want to see England in the morning and Scotland in the afternoon. No. You come in and we are going to have lunch together and we'll talk."

I was reluctant to sit down, but we enjoyed lunch together, and then some more relatives came by. We talked and met wonderful people and heard and told stories about family and friends. That evening Ian, Sheila's cousin, arranged for a bed and breakfast where we could stay, and we met some more delightful people. I realized as we drove away the next day that we had a much better visit than we had planned; but it meant slowing down, relaxing and spending time with people. Seeing more isn't always seeing better.

II

When the Psalm talks about lying down in green pastures and resting beside the still waters, it reminds us of the nurturing of God. Enjoying that peace means we aren't looking across the

valley to see if the grass is greener somewhere else. It's an image of having enough to drink and all we need to sustain us.

This is what restores our souls. When we are spiritually and physically depleted, it is God's presence that fills us back up. When we are spiritually arid, we need the rest and peace of God to replenish us. That's when we need to sit in green pastures and notice the still water. This kind of nurture doesn't come as we drive through the fast food restaurant to grab something to eat on our way from soccer to dance lessons. Much of it has to do with setting limits on the amount of activity that we and our kids will be involved in. We need time and space to be open to the way God is reaching out to us.

III

The writer, Frederick Buechner, tells of a time when he felt his life was coming apart. He was having trouble; he was worried all the time. It was relentless and he couldn't get away from it. One day he got in his car and just drove around town. Finally he parked in a little dirt road off the highway.

He sat there in his car, extremely upset. Then he saw a car coming down the paved road. He noticed that it had one of those personalized license plates. When it got closer he could read the plate: it said, "Trust." It was just the word he needed to see at that moment.

He did find out later that the owner of that car worked for a trust bank in town. The plate meant something different to its owner, but it didn't make any difference to Buechner because it was just the word he needed.

Have you ever notice how often in the Bible divine figures say, "Don't be afraid"? God says, "Do not be afraid" to Abraham when he tells him of the future God has in store. God says, "Do not be afraid" to Moses when he gives him the Ten Commandments. Angels say, "Do not be afraid" to Mary when they announce that she will give birth to Jesus; to the shepherds out in their field when they announce that Jesus has been born, and to the women who come to the tomb after Jesus death and resurrection.

All through the Bible we hear "Do not be afraid." Having trust in God means we can let go of fear. This Psalm tells us that even as we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" we don't need to be afraid. That phrase often makes us think of a fear of death, but it is also about not being afraid of the scary things in life. Maybe your job is in danger, or you are worried about one of your kids, or you have had tests done, and you are in that awful period of waiting for the results.

The Psalmist says he doesn't have to be afraid because God's "rod and staff comfort me." With the staff the shepherd leads the sheep through the difficult passages. He uses the rod as a club to ward off animals that might try to attack the sheep. We live with a sense of peace that one who is greater than we are is looking out for our best interests and cares about what happens to us.

IV

This same protector is a gracious host. He sets a banquet table for us even as our enemies watch. He pours oil on our head, which might not sound like all that good of a thing. Oil all over our head! Oil was used to anoint in two circumstances – for the religious person who was being ordained and for the king at his coronation. That image says that we are treated royally!

The cup, presumably wine, at the table is continually filled so that it overflows. We receive more than we need. Obviously we are very well cared for.

So that goodness, steadfast love and mercy will follow us all of our days. Some biblical commentators say that the phrase “follow us” doesn’t really get to the intensity of the Hebrew word. They suggest that it should be translated “pursue us.” Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue us all the days of our lives. The love, comfort and strength that God offers goes on forever.

Thus the next phrase tells us, “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” This isn’t only talking about after we die. We enter the house of the Lord now, as we become part of the Kingdom of God. We live our lives in God’s kingdom – in the house of the Lord - and when we die, the home we go to is a familiar one.

Conclusion

Sit back for a moment and hear again the promises of the twenty third Psalm. Let your mind wonder as some of the images especially connect with your life.

Our God is our shepherd.
We are being led along straight paths and by still waters.
We are brought to rest in lush green pastures,
We are being restored by rest,
moving through dark valleys,
relying on rod and staff for safety,
sitting before a full meal,
sitting with enemies,
being anointed,
watching our cup be filled to overflowing,
dwelling safely,
living in the house of God forever.

God draws us close, God stands by us through all that life brings, and God welcomes us home in the end.

Amen.