Sermon for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost

July 18, 2021

Psalm 23

The words of Psalm 23 have brought comfort to countless people over the millennia. We most often encounter them during times of sorrow, especially surrounding death.

But the words at the end — “surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” — ought to remind us that this Psalm is not meant just to offer consolation when we mourn.

Nor do these words only apply to God’s promises of salvation and eternal life.

These are words that are essential for a Christian life. Words that ought to apply to our lives on a daily basis.

As people of faith, we are called to learn to live into them: to learn to trust in God to provide for our needs, and to learn to live a life where we want for nothing.

The words of our Psalm are so familiar to many of us that it’s easy for us to miss that the shepherd metaphor is not the only one used by the psalmist. God is also compared to a table host.

Both of these roles are significant.

For those of us who have never had to tend actual sheep, it’s easy to romanticize the job of shepherd. But it’s a difficult, demanding task.

I follow a shepherd on social media. Dominique writes often about the challenges of keeping her sheep safe. Even with modern technology, like portable electric fences, she occasionally loses sheep to coyotes. When that happens, those of us who enjoy seeing the pictures of her sheep grazing and videos of them running around feel a small share of her pain.

Dominique’s goal is the safety of her sheep — leading them to safe pastures where they can eat. Providing them with adequate clean water and shelter. All so they can eat and drink and rest in safety. Her work often comes at the expense of her own comfort.

She has to do all these things for her sheep for the simple reason that they are unable to do them for themselves. They are vulnerable. They cannot defend themselves well.

And — let’s be honest — sheep aren’t the brightest bulbs on the Christmas tree. That humans are so often compared to sheep in the Bible is not the most flattering comparison.

We humans are vulnerable. We are all too easily distracted. We are imperfect. Like sheep, we need a shepherd to provide for us.

And we — like people during Jeremiah’s time, like the Israelites in Egypt, like the people who lived in Galilee under Herod — we know the challenges that come when we cannot trust those meant to protect us.

Dominique’s sheep have, over the many years she has tended them, learned to trust her. They know that she is the person they can follow so they will be kept safe.

And she usually does keep them safe.

But not always. She is not perfect.

When we say that the Lord is our shepherd, we declare our intent to place our trust in God to provide what we cannot provide for ourselves: adequate food, shelter, and water, protection from those who would harm us. And because we trust in God to do these things, we can make what the late Dallas Willard called one of “the most audacious assertions in the English language”[[1]](#footnote-1) — “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall want for nothing.”

Our familiarity with the shepherd-sheep metaphor can allow us to miss the other metaphor in our Psalm. God is compared to a table host who lays out a lavish feast for the psalmist. And it’s not just a feast. It’s a table set up in the presence of the psalmist’s enemies.

Just as it was a part of understanding last week’s Gospel, the honor and shame culture of the ancient world is an important part of these verses.

By setting a table and filling it with food, and then giving the psalmist not just a seat at the table, but a place of honor, God once again provides what the psalmist cannot do for himself:

God offers the psalmist a place at the table in the presence of those who would not have made room for him. Those who were hostile toward him. Those who might seek to harm him.

And God sets a table beyond compare.

For when God provides, God does not do just *enough*. God provides in abundance.

With God, we want for nothing.

In his meditation on the 23rd Psalm, Dallas Willard encourages us to ponder what our lives would be like if we could honestly, truly learn to say, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall want for nothing.”

To get there, he says, we have to better understand God’s nature.

When we explore the mythologies of ancient cultures, they’re full of stories of gods who are self-serving, egotistical, prone to act on whim or out of anger. Their primary concerns rarely seem to be the people. Indeed, the people seem to have presented offerings more out of fear than anything else.

But when we look at this Psalm, we see a different kind of god. We see a God who is concerned with the well-being of those who don’t have power. We see a God who cares enough to provide shelter and food and water, without insisting on getting anything in return. We see a God who operates out of love and compassion, and invites us to do the same.

We see a God who cares enough to accompany us through the darkest times of our lives.

A God who acts in this way allows us to live without fear.

A life without fear is not a life without responsibility. It is a life of *possibility*. A life of *peace*. A life of *love*. A life of *enough*.

One day, we will know this kind of life fully. But dwelling in the house of the Lord forever is not just a future thing. It’s a ***now*** thing for those who are willing to move past fear to trust in the One who created all that has ever existed and offers us all we need for an abundant life.

May it be so for us.

1. *Life without Lack,* Dallas Willard [↑](#footnote-ref-1)