Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Easter

April 21, 2024

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is the model for us for how we understand our relationship with God, the ways that God provides for us. God is our Shepherd, we’re the sheep. God knows us so well and loves us so much, that God knows what we need and provides for us.

I like sheep, but being compared to a sheep feels…a little insulting. Sheep aren’t very bright, and they’re easily distracted. Someone sent me a video that showed a sheep being pulled out of a ditch, bounding down the field, and falling back into the ditch again. I watched more times in a row than I want to admit.

I *want* to be offended by the comparison, but *twice* last week I searched for my phone only to realize it was **in my hand**.

Maybe I’m more like a sheep than I want to admit. Bah.

 Let’s start with what the Psalm promises us because God is our Shepherd:

 We lack for nothing. Which isn’t the same as saying there’s nothing we *think* we need, or nothing we *want*. It means God provides the things God knows we need, which are conveniently spelled out in the following verses.

 God provides a safe place for us to rest. We all understand the importance of good sleep. It’s hard to sleep well in an unfamiliar location. And if we don’t think we’re safe, we’re not going to sleep deeply, we’re not going to rest easily.

 God restores our souls. I think of this as the ways God speaks peace into our hearts, eases our fears and our anxieties. And that looks different for everyone, but it’s a need all of us have. When it goes unmet, fear and anxiety can take root in us.

 God leads us on right paths, in service of God’s will for creation. Notice that it’s not a singular *path*, but *pathways*, which suggests there isn’t only one right path for us to take in life, and *all* of the other possible paths are *wrong*. God can work good things in us and through us on multiple paths.

 But there are definitely *wrong* paths to take. Paths that lead us to things that don’t serve God’s will for creation. Perhaps one of the ways that God shows us grace, then, is that choosing a wrong path doesn’t mean we’re lost to God forever.

 And we can trust in *that* because part of the promise of this Psalm is that God accompanies us, even in the darkest times of our lives, in the moments when it feels like we’re alone. Maybe because of the choices we’ve made. **God’s still there.** Still pointing us to paths leading to places of wholeness and light. Places where our souls are restored, and we can rest securely.

 Then we come to what I think is the most interesting part of the Psalm: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

 I like this because it encourages us to ask my favorite theological question: WHY? Why would God set up a meal for us when our enemies are nearby, instead of…*very far away*?

 Everything else in the Psalm sounds so good. But this?

 I used to imagine a table filled with all my favorite foods, and there was just one chair, one fork, one plate. And that this meant that, even if my enemies were nearby, God would provide what I needed. I would be safe.

 And then one day it occurred to me that probably the meal wasn’t just for one person. That God would be offering food for anybody who wanted to eat. Anybody who was willing could have a seat at the table. Even the people I wasn’t so sure I wanted to share a meal with. Even the people who weren’t so sure they wanted to share a meal with *me*.

 Notice what Jesus says in our Gospel today: “I have other sheep that do not *belong* to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

 The people who don’t belong will get brought in so they can belong, so they can be part of the flock.

 **God doesn’t play favorites.** Everybody is invited to the meal. It’s not “for God so loved exactly the people we like.” It’s “for God so loved *the world*.”

 By setting a table for us in the presence of our enemies, God’s inviting us to see the possibility that they could one day be something *other* than an enemy.

 Being willing to share a meal with people we don’t like, people we don’t trust, people we’re afraid of, people who are different from us, takes a lot of courage. And it can cost us a lot.

 But it’s something we have to do if we want to learn to love one another as God loves us.

 The Psalm ends with a promise that God does all this relentlessly, accompanying us all the days of our lives. And we will never be separated from God.

 That God would do *all* of these things, know us *so well* that God would provide what we need, tells us the depths of God’s love for us.

 Sheep are not solitary creatures. It’s hard for sheep to thrive alone. It can happen. But it’s far more common for sheep to prefer being part of a flock.

 We’re like that, too. Some people really, *really* like being alone, living far away from anybody else. I remember our first trip to Alaska. Part of the trip was on a boat that took us up the Yukon River from a tiny town in Canada to an even tinier town in Alaska, one with more dogs than people. Which does sound awesome.

We saw cabins along the river. And people lived in them year round. *Miles* from their neighbors. Miles from Costco.

 For some, that’s a great way to live, and I’m not judging them *at all*. But for most of us? Living isolated like that would be unthinkable. We simply could not thrive that way.

 But being a part of a community comes with responsibilities. As our Epistle reading says, “how does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a sibling in need, yet refuses to help?”

 So while this is *most definitely* a Psalm that invites us to trust in God, words that comfort us and offer the promise that God is *always* with us, I think it also offers us a challenge. *Trusting* that God provides for our needs isn’t the same as *experiencing* our needs being met.

How are we called to aid our siblings in need?

 Because for all of these things to be true for *all people*, it requires us to trust in God, as sheep trusts the shepherd.

 And…*yeah*. It feels *impossible*. But I read somewhere[[1]](#endnote-1)… that *nothing* is impossible for God. What is impossible for the sheep is possible for the shepherd.

 Unlike sheep, we have fabulous things like opposable thumbs and gifts from the Holy Spirit. Just because we can’t fix all of the world’s problems doesn’t mean we don’t try to do *something* for *someone*.

 Theologian Walter Brueggeman, who is far wiser than I will ever be, says, “it is not that we pray the psalm because it says what we mean; instead, we pray the psalm because through saying it we come to mean and be what it says.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

 May it be so for us.

1. Luke 1:37; Matthew 19:26; Job 42:2; Genesis 18:14; Luke 18:27 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Brueggeman, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)