

Psalm Twenty-Three

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

I don't know about you, but I can't say I have ever met a shepherd before. This, despite growing up on a farm, having worked on several farms since, and having plenty of relatives who continue to work on and own their own farms.

Of course, you don't need to have crossed paths with a sheep farmer to understand Psalm 23 and for it to speak to you. That it continues to be one of the most well-known and frequently-recited passages of Scripture attests to that fact.

But it takes a little work to get there. In order to know what is meant by this psalm, you need to know something about sheep (that they are stubborn and prone-to-stray animals), and about what ancient shepherds did (kept count of their creatures, staved off thieves and predators, and sought out sources of sustenance on a daily basis).

It takes explanation to get there, because the metaphor's point of reference is largely foreign to the world that you and I inhabit. And so I wonder what it might look like to read this psalm through a role we *are* familiar with, today?

Working backwards from we know about this psalm is trying to say about who God is and what God does (provides for our needs [v.1]; brings us to safe places that do our souls well [v.2]; guides us along [v.3]; stays with us and comforts us, even unto death [v.4]; extends hospitality to us, even amidst threats [v.5]), what type of work comes to mind?

I wonder about God-as-frontline-worker. I write that, knowing that the widespread, public support and sentimentality that was expressed early on in the pandemic has long since faded into exhaustion and frustration. And yet, there is a line of work that we know well in this time.

I think we sometimes forget that shepherding was someone's ordinary, day-to-day work in David's day. In that same way that nursing, personal care, and stocking grocery store aisles is today. In the same way that those are often messy, physically-intense, and low-paid forms of labor. And in the same way that, under exceptional circumstances, the work involves a tireless and tiring commitment to risk one's own wellbeing for the wellbeing of another.

Psalm 23, Kelly J. Murphy writes, is a psalm of trust. And "songs of trust," she says, "have two things in common: a perceived calamity, and some kind of trust that the calamity or disaster will pass and all will be well."¹

Peril and crises characterize the imagery of this psalm, but also function as its historical backdrop. We don't know what those were, for the writer. But we know that generations since have turned to Psalm 23, in the midst of their own experiences of peril and crisis, seeking assurance of God's care and protection. Seeking assurance that "all will be well."

And so with all of that in mind, I invite you to read Psalm 23 as follows:

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-psalm-23-19>

Psalm Twenty-Three

The LORD is my support worker, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in a comfortable bed
(made neatly, with clean linens and care).
He holds me steady beneath running waters;
He gives life to my weary soul.

He warns me of the dangers, and steers me clear of them.
He shows me a safe way to go about my day.
He does this because this is who he is,
And this is what he does.

Even though these are dark times,
I will fear no evil;
For I am not alone.
Visits are restricted now, but you are with me.
Your mask and your face shield -
They are protection; they comfort me;

You come and set a table for me
(made with the groceries you bought,
and in the kitchen you helped to clean).
You make sure I have all I need, and more,
even in the presence of this invisible threat.

Surely goodness and mercy will go with me,
all the days of my life,
and I shall live at home with the LORD,
my whole life long.