

Goodness and Mercy in Pursuit

by

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

May 3, 2020

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I have enjoyed reading about the creative ways people are coping with social isolation, and how they are sharing their creativity with others.

Journalist Pete Wells wrote about how Shafer Vineyards in Napa Valley brings in a large herd of sheep to graze every spring. These natural lawn mowers are part of their approach to sustainable farming. Everyone at the vineyard loves it when the sheep arrive because their bleating presence is calming, cheering and peaceful.

Since we especially need calm, cheer and peace this year, they filmed the sheep eating their way through the vineyard and created a six-hour video called “Relax with Sheep” and put it on YouTube. Pete Wells describes it saying, “There are occasional shots of sheep resting their puffy round bodies between meals, and once in a while the flock will march slowly out of the frame on their way to what I imagine must be greener pastures. Mostly, though, the sheep stand and eat.” Occasionally a young spring lamb will come into view as it wobbles towards its mother, but other than that there is not a lot of action.

Shafer offered the film online because of “the upheaval and uncertainty of the world right now,” and they wanted to share the pastoral beauty of sheep peacefully grazing across their hillside vineyard. Around two hundred thousand people have looked at the video, and the comments about it are lovely. One reads: “No ads, no politics, no pandemic news, just a bunch of sheep chilling and doing their thing.” Another notes thoughtfully: “Now I know why Jesus loves sheep as well.”¹

Most of us city-folk do not spend a lot of time with sheep, but the biblical images of sheep, shepherd, green pastures still waters are nonetheless a cherished aspect of our religious psyche.

A couple of weeks ago, the Bryn Mawr Session broke into small Zoom conference calls to examine incoming officers in preparation for their service as new elders and deacons. Each meeting was hosted by one of the pastors and we asked all the participants to share what biblical passage or story or image was helping them through this disconcerting season of isolation. Each of the six groups had at least one or more person who recalled some aspect of the 23rd Psalm as a source of support during this time. It is our go-to psalm for the assurance of God’s near presence.

Rabbi Harold Kushner once said: “The 23rd Psalm is the answer to the question, ‘How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable and frightening

¹ Pete Wells, “Don’t Fence Me In: The Comforts of a Sheep Video,” *New York Times*, 4/14/20.

world?’ God’s promise was never that life would be fair. God’s promise was, when it’s your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you will be able to handle it, because God is on your side. God will give you the strength you need to find your way through.”²

The Psalm is brutally honest in acknowledging the difficulties we face in life. It gives voice to the fact that there are deathly valleys and enemies. It acknowledges there is evil present in the world, but it is not to be feared as the ultimate reality, because, come what may, we can place our trust in God who is the source of a life of peace and joy.

For many of us, it is the one psalm we have committed to memory, and our familiarity with its words helps us linger over the images of the Shepherd, green pastures, and still waters. We are often comforted in seasons of grief by the notion that we are never alone when “we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” It is natural for us to pause at these evocative words and images, and to savor the confident trust they call to mind.

However, one biblical scholar cautions us, to be careful not just to linger over the pastoral images and miss the climax of the psalm’s ultimate destination. With good humor, Carol Bechtel has noticed the pace of our reading Psalm 23 tends to speed up at the end. She likens it to the Spring piano recitals she dreaded as a child. Admitting her nervousness playing the piano in front of a crowd, she could hardly wait for the moment when the last notes were played which made her speed up. She writes, “Like a horse catching sight of a barn, I would break into a musical gallop as the piece drew to a close. No matter the intended tempo of the piece, toward the end – it went lickety-split.”

She observes a similar pattern in the way we tend to read Psalm 23. We linger slowly over the pastoral images, but when we get to the last verse, instead of savoring these words, we tend to speed up a little bit when saying: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...

² Harold Kushner, Religion & Ethics News Weekly, 11/26/04.

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Bechtel notes: whether we are aware of it or not, this verse reminds us there is Someone tailing us. Two somebodies, in fact. The Hebrew says goodness and mercy actually *pursue* us. And these words are worth our slowing down, to linger over what they mean, every bit as much as the lovely, pastoral images that come earlier in the psalm. These are two of the Bible’s weightiest words. “Goodness” is sometimes paralleled with “peace” and is often contrasted with “evil.” “Mercy” means “steadfast love” or “loving kindness”— that kind of love that will not let us go.³

We would do well to savor these weighty words, goodness and mercy, and the thought that they follow us, they pursue us. God’s goodness and mercy are always behind us. They are hot on our trail through good times and bad, doing their job by never letting us out of God’s gracious sight.

Psychotherapist Lori Gottlieb recently wrote an article called “Guide to Staying Sane During a Pandemic.” She says that while we are all taking measures to protect our physical health – washing our hands incessantly, staying home, social distancing and wearing masks, we also need to be paying serious attention to our emotional health. Our psychological immune systems need to be bolstered along with our physical ones. I like the way she frames it saying – we need to find ways “for our souls to breathe.” Gottlieb notes that it is normal to feel anxiety right now, and we should allow space for those feelings. Some anxiety is positive – it reminds us to wash our hands and to wear our masks. But unproductive anxiety and unchecked rumination will send us spinning unnecessarily in frightening directions.⁴

So while we are being forced to stay in much smaller worlds than we normally occupy – she recommends we focus on being present in the ordinary and familiar rhythms of life as much as possible. While we are protected from our normal hectic pace of life with all its comings and goings, we can

³ Carol M. Bechtel, “We’re Being Followed,” *Presbyterians Today*, 1998.

⁴ Lori Gottlieb, “Dear Therapist’s Guide to Staying Sane During a Pandemic,” *The Atlantic*, 3/17/2020.

pay attention to things we often take for granted – having a home, the meal before us, family and friends just a phone call away. I think we can apply that wise counsel to our spiritual lives as well – paying attention, with gratitude, for the familiar and ordinary.

There is not a passage of scripture more familiar to us than the 23rd Psalm, but its message is more than ordinary. It's extraordinary actually. This maybe the perfect season to read or recite it every day for a while. It will gently correct any tendency we have to think of faith in God, or spirituality, as something we have to look for and find for ourselves.

So while we have been forced to slow down we have opportunity to remember and give thanks for this most basic tenet of Biblical faith – it is God who pursues us. God's goodness and mercy – will always have our back.

AMEN.