

“GOD KNOWS OUR NEEDS BETTER THAN WE DO”

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Why does Psalm 23 speak to us as it does? How do its familiar cadences carve their way into our heart of hearts? What about this brief song manages to speak of God’s presence caring for us like no other Psalm? I’ve used Psalm 23 at every memorial service I’ve ever done for 35 years, the only biblical text like this. But its power is not just about facing death. It is no less real and resonant in facing life.

We go from child to adult in faith the day we realize praying is more about quiet listening to God rather than our busy chatter, telling God of our made-up needs and to grant them now. Psalm 23, like the best of the Bible, strips our imagined needs--often no more than petty crises of affluence--and lines out our real needs. But as the 23rd Psalm weans us from silly human ideas of what it means to be human, and imparts God’s idea of being human, it doesn’t scold or condescend. Wrapping itself around us, it comforts us. And that’s why Psalm 23 is so beloved.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” it begins, “I shall not want.” The first lesson of the Psalm is to recognize God as the ultimate caregiver and provider. Perhaps the most basic teaching not only of Judaism and Christianity, but of all historic faiths is God as giver of every good and perfect gift; all of our blessings find their origin in God; all of the goodness we can know in a lifetime points to God’s goodness.

This message might sound so obvious as to be hardly worth saying. It is not as though we haven’t heard it before. It is more like we constantly forget it. And it is worth emphasizing because, frankly, if we manage to keep this straight--if we can live grateful lives instead of entitled lives--if we can allow thankfulness instead of complaint become our keynote in living--we are already well on our way down the royal road to glad relations with God and each another. It’s like getting the first button in the right hole as we get dressed for the day. Everything flows from that.

God speaks to us today as God spoke of old to the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness. For even as this fugitive people had nothing except freedom and the clothes on their back, God saw to it that they lacked nothing, even to the point of sending manna from heaven. As they were homeless and didn’t know which way to turn, God provided for their daily needs. They lacked no good thing. We don’t know what tomorrow holds any more than that ancient refugee people.

Let’s face it, this earthly life has few guarantees. But we are provided for today. In a sense, that is all we need to know. The Lord, our good shepherd, sees to our today, as God has for every today for weeks and months, for years and decades.

The term Shepherd, we learn through King David’s story, had royal associations.

The rod and the staff were symbols of the shepherd king, and how God led and guided Israel through the wilderness. Rulers are supposed to shepherd and care for their people. Because that need goes to our core, the Lord *is* our shepherd.

The 23rd Psalms second great affirmation is also personally compelling: “for you are with me.” Amid life’s twists, we all need to know that we are not alone in the journey. Like the first affirmation, this one is basic and easy to take for granted. But there are moments when the importance of companionship leaps out at us.

How can we fear no evil? We can in knowing that God is never far. I played on my college hockey team. We lost more than we won. Being a dinosaur, I played in an era before shields. Sometimes my face got cut, needing stitches. So I’d wait till the game was over and then drive myself to the emergency room. Teammates offered to take me. But it was late and I didn’t want to put them out. Mr. Tough Guy, right? I didn’t know I was a hemophiliac back then. I thought everyone bled and bruised as I did. “No big deal,” I said. “It won’t take long.” But do you know, in the driving, the parking, the waiting, the injections, and the sewing, it was a big deal. I should have let them accompany me. Sometimes we need a companion.

Cathy and Ollie, you offered to come by my study for our pre-baptismal meeting. I gently asked to see you in your home. You welcomed me there. I needed to see Russell with you silently watching over him, protecting him scaling and descending the stairs, comforting his head bumps on the coffee table, with canine friends Scooter and Peaches shepherding him. Russell and all of us need companions.

It is always true, but in key moments we need to know that we are not alone in life’s journey. Even as the doctors cut on us, we are not alone. Even as we find our place within our new family, we are not alone. Even as we face economic uncertainty, we are not alone. Even as we watch the slow decline of a loved one, we are not alone. Even as we take that long slow walk to the graveside, we are not alone. Even as we walk the valley of the shadow of death, we are not alone.

The third major affirmation of the 23rd Psalm is: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” Suddenly we note a shift in the perspective of the Psalm. No longer is God the shepherd to the sheep. God is now host and we are guests. In praying this verse, a good Jew would have been mindful of what is called the desert rule of hospitality. What does that mean? If I am in danger, and enemies are pursuing me, in coming to your door, you would be expected to take me in for two nights and a day in between. My enemies would have to stay beyond the circle of light cast by the fire, according to this desert rule of hospitality.

That is the backstory of: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” God provides safety for the oppressed and sanctuary for the fugitive soul. For all of us, whether we use the word or not, are searching for sanctuary. Honestly, sometimes as I need a break from writing and planning, as I feel overwhelmed by expectation, as I need to remember who I am, I walk into this empty

sanctuary, this meetinghouse. It is as though I can see your faces, and faces of the Moses Mathers and Alfred Schmalzes. It somehow makes everything alright. Where do you go for sanctuary? For a walk under spreading, tree-lined streets? Maybe to a park, for a drive, or to the shore to hear waves lapping? Sanctuary is wherever we find God, feel his protection and able to resume our journey again.

Sanctuary is no abstraction. It is where we retreat to feel safe and most like ourselves. So much of what we do at FCC is in the hope being such a place for you. For we all seek a community embodying the qualities of the Shepherd who watches over, protects, provides for and creates safe places for those in his care.

The final affirmation of Psalm 23 is: I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. So the beloved Psalm ends—fittingly enough—lifting up our destiny. We live most serenely and we live our best lives when we live keeping before us the endpoint of where we are headed in life. The Psalmist fairly gushes: I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. This phrase is the clincher, the *piece d' resistance*, the keystone the Psalmist builds in his poetic bridge back to God.

House of the Lord is a phrase pregnant with meaning. House in Hebrew also means lineage or bloodline. So here we are taken in as part of God's family. House of the Lord also refers to the Jerusalem temple, just as we call this place God's house. But for those of us who follow Jesus, it hearkens to his words in John 14, as he bids farewell to his disciples. "I go to prepare a place for you. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." The Shepherd guides us and shows the way to that home not made with human hands, the one eternal in the heavens. The ace always up our sleeve is that our final resting place is with the Lord God.

How does this beloved Psalm speak to you? Which of its resources do you turn to—spiritual, relational, emotional—to survive a week? Which of its phrases take hold of you: *the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*. Others of us turn to it as we panic with our fears of feeling alone in the world, maybe alone in our homes, alone in our struggles, or alone in not mattering to anyone. *For you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me*. Other times fear grips us that we can't shake. We want to draw a circle around ourselves and those we love to protect them from violence, addiction, danger, or despair. Then we pray: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*. Finally, still others worry about where it all ends, harboring the tender hope that this earthly glove isn't our last stop. The words trip off our tongue: *I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever*.

Wherever you are in your journey, whatever doubts afflict you, however frantic is your search for hope, I invite you and yours to dwell in the shelter of this Psalm. Amen.