

A Psalm for the Living

Psalm 23

I'm sure you have all seen funeral cards with pastoral images of the humble shepherd herding his sheep. The colors are pastel and soothing, the sky in the picture is a perfect blue, the face of the shepherd is gentle, and you can almost feel the soft wool of the sheep. The image is meant to give comfort to all in a time of grief. No wonder Psalm 23 has become associated with death.

When I was doing my pastoral internship, I spoke on the message of the good shepherd in John 10 and related it to Psalm 23. After the service a member of the congregation came to me and said they had never realized that Psalm 23 could apply to the living, since they had only ever heard it recited at funerals. This morning, we are going to investigate how Psalm 23 is meant for those of us still on this side of heaven.

This psalm is written according to a major theme in the psalm collection, that of the distress and subsequent deliverance of the writer. In this case, King David is the writer to which this psalm is attributed. And well it could be that he is the writer since we know in his lifetime, he faced numerous trials and tribulations that caused him to call out to God for relief. Threatened by King Saul as a youth, even though he had slain the giant, Goliath. As king finding his nation under attack by surrounding

kingdoms. As an older man facing an uprising led by his own son. David had plenty of material from which to craft his psalm. In the psalm we see themes of provision, abundance, and restoration that David experienced at the hands of God. Let's begin.

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Shepherds are totally responsible for the care of the sheep in their flock. Whatever needs the sheep have, the shepherd must meet in order to keep all of them safe and healthy. The very first line of this psalm tells us that the Lord is our provider, we will have all that we need to live.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.” The theme of provision continues. Not only will we have what we need, but we will have it in abundance. Shepherds seek out the best pastures with sources of clean water for their flocks. If the sheep do not have sufficient feed or access to clean water, there will be problems for both the sheep and the shepherd. In the midst of times of trouble, it may be difficult to remember, but God wants the best for us and the best in abundance.

“He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” The Bedouin shepherds in Jesus' time and even up to today lead their flocks. The shepherd leads the flock along paths that are safe so as not to put the sheep in danger. The sheep know they can trust

their shepherd in this way. By leading us on the paths of His righteousness, when our spirits have been broken by the trials of life, God knows we will be restored.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, give me comfort.”

David had many occasions in his life where he found himself in the valley of the shadow of death. Yet images of the tools of the shepherd, with which he was well acquainted, offered comfort in times of distress. There may be times when the shepherd has to lead the sheep through areas that are less than safe, yet the sheep will trust the shepherd because he cares for them. While God might not use a literal rod and staff to guide us today, he does send people or circumstances to influence the way we will go.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup is filled to overflowing.” Hospitality, a prepared table, was a requirement in David’s day, for friend or foe.

Yet even in the presence of his enemies, David felt secure. Shepherds will anoint the heads of their sheep when injured or as a means to repel pests that plague them. Anointing was used for healing in both animals and people in David’s time. God’s anointing in his life accounts for the abundance of God’s deliverance in his life.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” This last verse confirms that not only is this a psalm for the time of death, but also a psalm for the living. David claims that God’s goodness and mercy will be with him all the days of his life. David lived a long life and God was with him, delivering him from trouble many times. When David came to the end of his life, he knew where he was going – the house of the Lord, for all eternity.

Today, we, the living, are invited to claim this psalm as a promise of provision, abundance, and restoration in our own lives. We may not graze like sheep, but the Lord provides for us in other ways. He has joined us as a community of believers who care for one another. Not only do we care for our brothers and sisters within this congregation, we have been called to care for our neighbors through the Friendship House Day Care Center and food cupboard. In this way we share the abundance God has provided for us, as individuals and as a congregation.

God has opened us to prepare a table, not with enemies, but with our brothers and sisters from the Congolese congregation when they begin meeting in this meetinghouse. I can only imagine that God’s anointing

on these two congregations will become an overflowing stream of blessing in the Hatfield community.

This morning we invite the Spirit of the Living God to lead us into the future He has planned for us, to work to bring His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Looking forward to a future where we all will reside in the house of the Lord forever. AMEN

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