

April 15, 2018
The Third Sunday of Easter
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Yesterday as we gathered together for Lydia Lab's funeral, the Psalm 23 was one of the readings. It is a favorite for many people and for some it is the favorite. We often read it at funerals and in times of grief or distress, because it brings comfort when people may feel that God is not as close as they would like God to be. It speaks a word of reassurance that in fact God is near. God has been and will be present to care for us, for he is our Good Shepherd.

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For many of us, we also know this psalm as a favorite hymn or song such as [The King of Love My Shepherd Is](#) or maybe [Shepherd Me, O God](#) by Marty Haugen. "Shepherd Me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life."

For some, they only need to hear the very first line of the psalm and it all comes to mind. It is a simple metaphor, reassuring us that God has satisfied every need. The imagery changes throughout the verses, but the central idea remains constant. God will provide all that we need.

As we planned worship, we wondered if maybe we should leave out the psalm. After all, it's so familiar. Maybe people get tired of it, but the truth is that we don't.

Old Testament Scholar Joel LeMon says that, "our reading ... of this text should not be sentimental, but bold, always keeping in mind the ways that its radical claims confront our experiences of suffering, fear, enmity, and alienation." [WorkingPreacher.org]

We need the good news of this psalm, because that good news never gets old.

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Like many of the Hebrew psalms, the twenty-third is attributed to King David. Since he was a shepherd in his youth, it makes for a good story, but scholars can't say for sure who wrote the song. And it is a song. All the psalms are meant to be sung and in Jewish households it is often sung in Hebrew at the third Sabbath meal, which would be lunch on Saturday.

For Christians, the imagery is closely tied to stories of Jesus, like the one in our gospel today. The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is found in music and artwork and even church names- and so it makes sense that when we hear "The Lord is my shepherd," we think of Jesus.

But is there more to be found in our dear old friend? Are there surprises in this psalm? What may we have missed? It starts out with pastoral images. You've seen the pictures. There's a shepherd in the countryside somewhere- green fields, white sheep, and a lovely babbling brook. But the psalm isn't a static picture. This is a journey that the psalmist describes. The respite in green pastures is temporary. The speaker is on the go, walking beside the water and along the paths and through the valleys. And then, after describing the blessing that will come in the house of the Lord in verse 5, the psalmist is on the move again. "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And here's the first surprise.

The word translated into English as "follow" is *radaph*. Modern Hebrew scholars would say that it is better translated as "pursue," which is surprising since usually this verb is used to describe enemies that are chasing someone. Plus, in this same verse, the word *surely* or (aq) in Hebrew, would be better translated as "only." So rather than enemies being in hot pursuit, the psalmist says that "only goodness and mercy will be chasing me down." Nothing and no one else is trying to catch me- only goodness and mercy.

LeMon suggests that the imagery in the final line of the psalm also deserves another look. For most people, the picture that comes to mind is that of living in the house of the Lord forever. It is a comforting and joyful resting place, where I will *dwell*. But the word "shuv" which is translated as dwell

is seen by some scholars to mean “a return with the desire to stay where one ends up,” while others understand *shuv* in its simplest sense, which is “to turn” or “return.” So if we look at verse six in light of all of the other traveling images, one can read the last line this way, “I will continually return to God’s presence, my whole life long.” The journey doesn’t end at the end of the psalm. Instead, seeking God’s presence is a lifelong journey of returning to the place where we were always meant to be.

The journey consists of “paths of righteousness,” which brings another little surprise. In Hebrew *ma’galim*, which we read here as “paths, is found in other places in the Bible translated as “tracks” or entrenchments” or even “ruts.” It describes the kind of grooves that are made by the wheels of an ox-cart. It’s like the ruts in a country lane, worn from coming up and back the same path again, and again.

The righteous path then, is one that is created by walking with God again and again- creating paths, patterns, and grooves. God is leading us into a rut, for the best of reasons- to have a life that creates and sustains good relationships with your loved ones, with your community and with your God. To live this way, to get into this rut, gives glory to God’s name. It promotes God’s reputation. God leads us in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake, so that others will see and hear and know.

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I can’t imagine ever reading Psalm 23 and not thinking about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but I think that we might also see him as a trail blazer. Have you ever blazed a trail? When I was in college I worked at Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp in Hillside, Colorado. During staff training, we had to go out and blaze the trails that we would be taking the kids on. From one summer to the next, the trails could become harder to find. Trees might have fallen. Rain and snow may have changed the terrain. Scrub oak and other plants may have grown up and covered the trail. And so we would have to clear the way and mark the trail. By the end of the summer, trails that might were hard to find in May, would be worn into the ground by the hundreds of hikers that would have gone up and down the mountain.

Jesus is our trail blazer. Clearing the way. Removing obstacles. Marking the best way to give glory to God.

Of course, the psalm doesn’t describe paths of righteousness as going directly from the green pastures to the house of the Lord. Those paths, those ruts have to go through the darkest valleys to reach the ultimate destination. And for Jesus, the paths of righteousness lead to the cross. He lays down his life for the sake of the world, so that through him we might have life and have it abundantly.

We are invited to follow that same path. In our second lesson, John reminds us that our identity as children of God should be shown in our daily lives. If we’re going to walk the path, it is done not in word or speech, but in truth and action. John basically says if our hearts don’t condemn us then we are on the right track.

Have you ever had your heart condemn you? I have. When I’m trying to figure out how much I should pledge for my offering, if there’s no sense of anxiety, then I know I’m on the right track. But we know when our heart is condemning us. Have I done enough? Should I help that person? Is that something I could or should be doing?

If we are loving like Jesus loves, then it is pretty certain that goodness and mercy are chasing us down the road.

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Having said all these things about the Psalm, shouldn't take away from the long time love we have had for this poetry. I find new things in the Bible all the time. And that doesn't diminish anything that I have held dear in the past.

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There's this scene in Shrek when the ogre is trying to explain himself to his friend Donkey.

And he says: Ogres are like onions.

Donkey: They stink?

Shrek: Yes. No!

Donkey: Oh, they make you cry.

Shrek: No.

Donkey: Oh, you leave 'em out in the sun, they get all brown, start sproutin' little white hairs.

Shrek: No. Layers! Onions have layers. Ogres have layers. Onions have layers. You get it?

We both have layers.

The Bible has layers. But you have to get in there and look around. It's a part of wearing that righteous groove into the ground. I encourage you to look at the layers. Join a Bible study. Do a Google search on something you've always wanted to understand. Get a book that tells more about Biblical history or watch a good film. Look for the layers, because it is those layers of meaning that can help us so much when we are in the dark valleys.

And as you do those searches and studies, as you wear those righteous grooves into the ground, keep in mind that the Good Shepherd is leading you while goodness and mercy are chasing you down!