

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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The NDP of Psalm 23

am, Holy Communion

The Text: Psalm 23

- ¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
³ He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

At the start of a new year, King David has a word for you and a word for me. Although David lived some 2900 years ago, I hope the words of Psalm 23 are helpful for you at the start of 2009

While the psalm does not have a subscript that tells us the situation the writer was facing, as some of the Psalms do, we know it is a Psalm of David. David was the man responsible for the authorship of the majority of these prayers making up the 150 Psalms of the Psalter. David is also the man whose life we know more about than any other person in entire Bible. It is helpful, when reading the Psalms, to also read your way through first and second Samuel and first and second Chronicles. Samuel and Chronicles gives us the narrative of David's life and the Psalms gives insight into the soul of David as he lives out the events described in such detail in these four books. Samuel and

Chronicles are the biographies and the psalms are David's personal conversations with God, or we could say his prayer journals.

While the context for Psalm 23 cannot be definitively set, I would like to suggest that it dates from David's middle years. His Son, Absalom, has usurped the throne in Jerusalem and set himself up as King. This is described in 2 Samuel 15 - 17. David, the true and legitimate king has had to flee the city, for he is fearful that Absalom will kill him. The setting can therefore be stated thus:

David is on the run, from his own son, as he writes words that have been memorialized for over 2800 years.

It is helpful to realize that the setting for these words was not inspired by an idyllic experience when David was at peace and all was well with his world. No, it was just the opposite. Here is a psalm that is intended for us when life does not extend to us a helping hand but rather a slap in the face. Here is a psalm for people who, like David, are experiencing a major upheaval in their lives. It is a psalm for people who are shaken and in turmoil.

The theme of the Psalm is set for us in verse 1: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." I have mentioned before that when the Old Testament uses the word "Lord" this is always speaking of the God who enters into a covenantal relationship with his people. This means many things, but in part it means the Lord knows his people by name and they know him by name. It is at the same time the most reverential and the most personal name for God that David could use when referring to Him. Because the Lord is relational, David is able to affirm that he cares for him like a shepherd does his sheep. It is worth seeing how this imagery is used in other verses in the Old Testament that speak of God as Shepherd.

Psalm 78:52 states:

Then he led out his people like sheep
and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.

Isaiah 40:11 affirms:

He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

In Ezekiel there are two references worth noting, both in chapter 34.

For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. 12 As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have

been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. (34.11-12)

And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. (34.23)

Do you see the interplay here between environments of danger and the caring and courageous gentleness of the Shepherd? As we think of this Psalm may it inspire us to call to mind the biblical attributes of God's character. When we are able to imagine God as he reveals himself to us in the Word, then we are more able to affirm that he is my shepherd, therefore I shall not want.

It is difficult for us at times to live in this place, where we can say that the Lord is my all in all. We can be so tempted to look for satisfaction and the supplanting of our wants through the affirmation of others, through our successes and sometimes vicariously through our children. And yet here is David, who had been at the pinnacle of power brought again to this place of complete trust in God. This is indeed one of the most significant things we learn from David's life. In many ways he was so very successful in the way the world measures success. And yet he was always brought to a place, where because of the circumstances of his life, he had to turn again to God and say you alone are my shepherd, therefore I shall not want. God wants us to be completely dependent upon him alone. Such dependence can only be learned through the times of life's sorrows and profound and deep challenges.

There are three specific things the Psalm has to teach us about how we do this. There is also an overarching promise given at the end. The three specifics can be remembered by the letters NDP. The three things we learn in this Psalm are that the Lord our Shepherd wants to:

1. Nurture us,
2. Direct us,
3. Protect us.

The overarching promise is that God cares for us with a providential love that is summarized in verses 5- 6.

So now let us see what Psalm 23 has to say about how the Shepherd nurtures, directs and protects us.

1. The Lord our Shepherd nurtures us:

The nurturing character of the Lord our shepherd is described in verse 2 and 3a.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
3 He restores my soul.

What are the two things that sheep need the most in order for them to survive and thrive? Green pastures and still waters. These are so very important for healthy sheep. As David draws a parallel between the nurturing of sheep and the soul, you will notice that he relates the rest of the sheep to the restoration of the soul. The nurture that we most need from the Lord is that which feeds the inner person, the soul within each one of us.

You will notice that the Shepherd makes his sheep lie down beside the still waters. They cannot be constantly on the move. There is instruction in this for you and me. We cannot seek to live the Christian life when we are never able to find a place where we can be restored. Interestingly for David, given the context of the Psalm, he finds this place of refreshment when he is put into a trying a difficult situation away from Jerusalem, while in hiding from his son. In this most challenging place he discovers that God is providing for him restoration in the middle of great turmoil. Remember, this was not a circumstance of David's choosing. Yet what he does choose is to affirm that in the midst of difficulty the Lord is nurturing him.

The Lord has provided two ways for our souls to be nurtured that parallel the water and green pastures given for the sheep. The first way the Lord nurtures us is through and by his word. What an important means of nourishment God has given us in the Bible. We are to feed on the word of God the way the sheep feed on the pastures that are before them. When we read scripture the way sheep feed on their grass, we do not have to analyze every word and try to make sense everything we are reading. What is important is that we choose to read the word and take it into our souls. When we are alive in Christ, there is nothing that is more important for the Christian than to daily feed from the word of God.

Here is the thing I hope you will discover, if you have not already. As you feed on the word and make it your daily practice, it will become more important and necessary to you. It will become habitual and there will be an inner prompting from the Spirit, whereby he will say to you, rest a while, feed from my word and be nourished.

If the word of God is like the green pastures, the Sacrament of Communion is like the fresh, still and cooling waters. There is a way that we are truly nurtured as we share in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus. Like with the reading of Scripture, the more we attend to the Sacrament and make it a priority in our week, the more we will yearn to be feed spiritually at the Lord's Table. Perhaps this is something you have discovered already in your life. At one time you gave little thought to Communion. But now in your life you look forward to the time when you can feed on Jesus in your heart by faith with thanksgiving.

As we take to heart the Lord's invitation to come and rest through the reading of his word and the partaking of the sacrament we feed upon Jesus. These are ways we draw upon Jesus and our soul is satisfied. Jesus uses the same figure in John 6:

"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." (John 6:27-35 RSV)

The Word of God and the Sacrament does this for us. It brings us, first, to the person of Christ. "Beyond the sacred page," the hymn says, "we see thee, Lord." We see him, and we eat and drink of him, and we discover him to be the resource that we need. As Paul says, "Though the outward man perishes, the inward man is renewed day by day," (2 Corinthians 4:15 KJV). Our souls are restored. How? As we feed upon him. As we come to know him, believe what he says, and act on his word, we discover that the inner person is fed.

2. The Lord our Shepherd Directs us:

So at the start of this year we learn from David that we are to be nurtured by our Lord the Shepherd through his word and sacrament. Secondly we learn from this Psalm that the Lord our Shepherd also wants to direct us. At verse 3B we read:

He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

The Hebrew word translated "paths" means "a well-defined, well-worn trail." This indicates again how much we need a shepherd. Even when the trail is well laid out sheep are still inclined to wander away, no matter how obvious the path may be. The shepherd knows the trails. He has been there before, and the sheep trust him.

Psalm 11 says:

For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds;
the upright shall behold his face.

Who are the upright? They are those people who know that the Lord is righteous and he loves righteous deeds in those who are his people. To be led in the paths of righteousness brings us back to the word of God. As we learn the word and apply it to our lives, God will lead us in the right paths. You see God is concerned about how we live our lives. Belief is not just a question of right thinking, but also right living. As we learn to follow in the way of the Lord, we will behold his face. Remember Jesus said that “Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God”. To grow in holiness is something that we as Christians are to yearn for more and more. We are to be people who pray intentionally that God will show us the path of righteousness. As we seek discernment we will remember that such direction will never be in contradiction to the Word God has given to us for our nourishment.

It is instructive that in other Psalms David prayed like this:

Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness
because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me. (Psalm 5.8)

For you are my rock and my fortress;
and for your name’s sake you lead me and guide me; (31.3)

And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! (139.24)

Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God!
Let your good Spirit lead me
on level ground! (143.10)

Do you hear the honesty of these prayers? David wants the Lord to reveal to him those ways where he is wandering off the path of righteousness and then asks him to bring him back on. He realizes that how he lives reflects on God. He wants to honour his Shepherd by how he lives and so he prays:

True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction. (The Message)

May we in 2009 grow in offering prayers that are equally honest as we seek to know the direction of the Lord.

3. The Lord our Shepherd protects us:

So far we have seen how the Lord nurtures and directs us, we now turn to verse four which affirms how the Lord protects us:

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

This again is a very picturesque scene. The shepherd is leading the sheep back home at evening. As they go down through a narrow gorge the long shadows lie across the trail. In the Hebrew this is a "valley of deep shadows". The sheep, because they are so timid and defenseless, are frightened by their experience. But they trust the shepherd, and therefore they are comforted. They will fear no evil, because the shepherd is with them. We are reminded of the Lord's words quoted in the book of Hebrews "I will never leave you nor forsake you," Hebrews 13:5). Hence we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear what man can do to me," Hebrews 13:6). I do not know what your experience has been, but whenever I'm in a situation like this, when there is a great deal of pressure, I begin to wonder if the Lord hasn't abandoned me. But he says he never leaves us, never forsakes us. He is always there. Therefore we have no reason to fear. That is a great comfort.

And then David writes, "Your rod and staff comfort me." The rod was a club which was used to drive off wild animals. It was never used on the sheep but was a heavy instrument used to protect the sheep from marauding predators. The staff was a slender pole with a little crook on the end. It was used to aid the sheep. The crook could be hooked around the leg of a sheep to pull him from harm. Or it could be used as an instrument to direct, and occasionally to discipline the sheep, with taps on the side of the body. Understanding how the shepherd tends his sheep has helped me so much in understanding the character of God. When I go wandering away he doesn't say, "There goes that stupid sheep, Jonathan Gibson !" and -- WHAP! down comes that big club! No. His attitude is, "Well, there's Jonathan , wandering away again. How can I help him? How can I move in to bring him back into line? How can I comfort him, and supply what he needs?" He may have to discipline, but he always does it in love. He reproves, corrects, encourages, and instructs in righteousness, dealing with us firmly and gently.

The rod and staff are also used against the two greatest enemies we have to face. The rod is for the enemy without, Satan, who is working through the world system to destroy us. Jesus said, "He is a liar and a murderer." He's out to devour us, and so the Lord uses the club on him. But the other enemy is me, the enemy within. The shepherd's staff is used to chasten, and to subdue the enemy within. But the confidence he gives is that I have nothing to fear, either from the enemy without, or from the enemy within.

Now it is worth noting that subsequent to David's time on the run, he was re-established to the throne in Jerusalem. However, in 2 Samuel 18 we learn of the death of Absalom and David's grief that marks the end to this trying and painful chapter in David's life.

Therefore we see that these are words that are expressed when life could not be more trying.

Having prayed to the Lord, his Shepherd, David ends the Psalm by restating everything he has already said. Now the imagery changes from that of a Shepherd, to a host at a meal:

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

Here are the three characteristics stated again. Verse five speaks of the nurturing care of the host who not only prepares a meal for this guest in the presence of enemies but anoints his head with oil. This is symbolic of being looked upon with favour. When we allow ourselves to be nurtured by the Lord, in the presence of great challenges and conflict the soul can be renewed and restored. The first part of verse 6 speaks again and God's direction. The more apt word for "follow me" is the word "pursue". Is it now instructive to think how at a time when Absalom is pursuing his father to kill him, David affirms that God the Shepherd/host is pursuing me with his goodness and mercy. This is another way of speaking of God's righteousness. Then finally, what greater protection can there be than to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Yes, here is a Psalm affirming God's continual care for David as he nurtures, directs and protects him in the face of a tumultuous life experience. May you enter into 2009 with this psalm impressed upon your mind and your heart as you affirm: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want because he is with me to nurture, direct and protect me in 2009.

Amen.