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## A Journey Through Psalm 23

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**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**The Fourth Sunday of Easter**

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." -Psalm 23:1*

So begins one of the most familiar passages of the Bible. Even if you have never been to church, you may have heard those comforting words. We say them at funerals; we say them at weddings. We see them on posters and needlepoints and Facebook pages.

"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." Hearing even just a short verse of that psalm, my soul begins to soar to a different place, to a refreshing, calm spot beside still waters.

It so happens that the Church reads this psalm every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, a Sunday known as "Good Shepherd Sunday." "The Lord is my shepherd." The psalms, of course, have long been the church's poetry and hymnody. They speak to us in a way that theology and narrative do not. They express, not just cerebral and intellectual matters, but the full breadth of human emotion and spirit. I mean the *full range* of human experience—love and tenderness, yes, but also revenge and anger, and deep mourning.

From time to time, if not daily, it is good to linger with the psalms, especially if our days, or our weeks, have been emotionally tumultuous. And this week, across our nation, has certainly been tumultuous. Today, I want to linger with the Twenty-third psalm. Let's reflect on it, study it, let its images sink a little deeper into our spirits today. Let's take a journey through Psalm 23.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*4 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.*

*5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

The psalm is only six verses long, but it is an almost perfect piece of psalm poetry. There is a reason it is among the most beloved of our scriptural passages. In six short verses, it journeys through our human faith, our human joy, our human fear, and our human desire.

**1. "The Lord is my shepherd."** it begins. For me, the emphasis should be on that first word, "Lord." "Who is my shepherd?"

The LORD, that word of unpronounceable mystery. But the LORD is Yahweh, the biblical God whose very history is intertwined with our human history. Yahweh is the God who does not mind getting mixed up in human endeavors and travails. This was true for the Old Testament Yahweh, and, of course, it is true with Jesus, who is truly God-in-the-flesh—Yahweh in the flesh.

Who is my shepherd? Yahweh, God-in-the-flesh is my shepherd. A shepherd is someone who guides and protects, and who loves, even when that protection and love gets him—or her—quite dirty and stained in the world. A true shepherd has to get dirty, slipping and sliding and worrying. The God of the Bible, Yahweh, does those things.

**"I shall not want,"** the psalmist continues. Let's call the psalmist, "David," here, though David certainly did not write all the psalms. "I shall not want" might be one of the secrets of life. Try speaking that little mantra, "I shall not want," the next time you are worried. Or, the next time, you feel disappointed or envious, or angry that things have not gone your way. This line is one of the secrets of life: to not want, to not desire, to not covet. So much of our life is consumed with wanting something else. Whatever we seem to have, we seem to also want something else. To which the psalmist declares, *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."*

**2. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."** Ah, who among us can resist that desire—to rest among verdant fields, in idyllic, utter relaxation. Even if we cannot escape to the literal countryside, every one of us needs fresh air and green fields. City parks are good for us; urban gardens are important. Maybe they symbolize that first garden we once knew as human beings, the Garden of Eden, the one Joni Mitchell said we've got to get back to. We all have primal urge to return there. We were made for gardens, for lying down in green pastures. Our God, our shepherd, provides for that spiritual rest.

**"He leadeth me beside the still waters."** Again, this verse reminds us that the Lord has a day of rest for us, a time when the interior waters of our lives can be still. When the world turns frantic and hectic, when the expressway speeds are just too much for us, the Lord leads us beside the still waters.

**3. "He restoreth my soul."** What is the soul? And how can we restore it? For me, the soul is the source of life in us. It is where a deep sense of God and life reside in us. It is when we pause from the ways of our churned up world, that we begin to be aware of another reality inside us, a soul-reality, that generates life in us.

**"He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."** It is critical here, that restoring our soul does not mean simply lying around in pastures, not doing anything, forever! When our soul is restored, we actually begin to walk in better ways! We are meant to walk, not simply to rest; we are led in the paths of righteousness.

The phrase, "paths of righteousness" does not mean only the "right" paths, following every little jot and tittle of the law. The word "righteous" does not mean simply adhering to every law. The word "righteous" means "right relationship." To walk in the paths of righteousness means to walk in right relationship, in right relationship with God, with other people, and with the world.

**4. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death."** When we walk, whenever we walk, whenever we get up the energy to proceed in life, we will go through darkness. It is one of the realities of life that every walk, every journey, passes by the shadow of death.

We were reminded of that reality this past week during the tragic Boston Marathon. Every human journey is a marathon. It's a long race. And we will, inevitably pass by, if not through, the shadow of death. Yes, that shadow is a shocking and frightening thing. There is no predicting where that shadow will cast its darkness next.

David, the psalmist, has walked in that valley before. The words of all the psalms indicate that their writers knew times of loss and hardship. This is why we turn to the psalms; there is no human experience that the psalms do not know. The psalms even know our human tendencies towards hate and anger, and revenge and hate; the psalms take all those emotions to God.

It might be that each of us walks close to death daily. We walk in places of fear and of outright danger. How should we react?

**"I will fear no evil,"** the psalmist then declares. Yes, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but I will fear no evil. In fact, time and time again, these are the recurring words of scripture: "Have no fear." From the prophets to the angel Gabriel speaking to Mary. In our day, from the streets of Atlanta, New York, and Boston: "do not be afraid." Faithful people know that God always consoles humanity: have no fear. Why should we not fear?

**"For thou art with me;"** The all-loving and all-good God of the universe is with you. Why have no fear? Because the Lord is with you. The mysterious presence of the universe is with you.

**"Thy rod and they staff, they comfort me."** What is the rod and the staff? It could be any equipment which the Lord has given me, for my journey through life.

The word "rod" comes from the word, "root," or "branch," or "offshoot." Maybe the rod, then, is an offshoot of the Good Shepherd's main trunk, the vine, the mighty tree of life. Each of us has some sort of offshoot from that tree of life. Wherever you are, in whatever kind of danger or trouble you are in, you have some splinter of life nearby. Go for that rod of life. Of course, we saw such rods of life in the midst of the Boston Marathon tragedy this past week. Even in the midst of terror and shock, there were people of courage of heroism; they were the rods of life. They were restoring life and order even in the midst of chaos.

A staff, of course, is another source of support. God's staff is the support that is given us, even from strangers. Even when we cannot walk, even when we cannot run, God's staff is that miraculous support that emerges from the darkness to lift us up.

**5. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies."** The psalm now turns to a vision, maybe a heavenly vision, one that is not present yet, but which is our longed-for goal. Theologians call this vision "eschatological;" the vision has to do with the end times, but qualities of the vision can be real in the present, right now.

A table prepared for me in the presence of my enemies has a surreal quality about it. That is, something about the kingdom of God will still have the presence of enemies; and yet, and yet, we will not be afraid of those enemies. Our enemies may, in fact, be there at the table, too; but they will be no threat to us. There is no threat at the table God prepares for us.

**"Thou anointest my head with oil."** In ancient times, anointing with oil was a way of sanctifying items for God: shields, tabernacles, kings, priests, prophets. Anointing also symbolizes the setting apart of something for service. When God anoints us, we are set apart, for service. Again, we do not just linger in the green pastures; we are anointed for service.

**"My cup runneth over."** And what does our cup run over with? With grace. When it is God who fills our cup with grace, our cup surely runs over. This verse is God's promise to provide us grace, a measure of grace that is always more than we need.

**6. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."** That word, "mercy," is one of the great words of the Hebrew scriptures. Mercy is the "loving-kindness" of God. It means forgiveness, yes, but it means even more than that. There is something at the heart of God that is deep goodness and deep kindness, and loving-kindness that is stronger than all things.

When we rest in God, and walk in the paths of right relationship, when we carry the rods and staff of life, when we are anointed with grace, then goodness and mercy follow us. God's goodness and mercy do not happen by accident. They happen with all that Psalm 23 has previously mentioned: restoration of soul, right relationship, the rod of life, the anointing with grace.

**"And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever"** The psalm ends in the house of the Lord. After resting in green pastures, and then walking in righteousness, the psalmist ends at a dwelling-place: the house of the Lord, the place of protection, comfort, and peace.

Thus concludes a magnificent psalm, a psalm that in six short verses takes us through the long journey of life. The psalm

takes us from the beauty of the natural world (vss 1-2) to the indoor world (6b). The psalm acknowledges both peace (2) and peril (4b). The psalm speaks of both the possibility of evil (4b) and the prospect of good (5). The psalm inspires the soul (3a) even as it also knows ominous gloom (4a).

Ultimately, Psalm 23 is a psalm of life. Life is not always pleasant and good. There is death, and there is gloom. But our shepherd is not death or gloom or fear. Our shepherd is the God of life and hope; goodness and mercy. "The LORD is our shepherd; we shall not want or fear. Our cups of grace and mercy runneth over."

AMEN.

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