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Easter 4, Year A

The Twenty-Third Psalm is one of those rare parts of the Bible that most of us know. If we don't know it by heart, we at least know it well enough to recite it in a congregation. The images are vivid: sheep lying in green grass, calm waters, dark valleys, a cup overflowing. The images point to a comforting truth: God is our shepherd. What a promise! God leads us and guides us. God is always with us.

People have said or sung this psalm for thousands of years not only because of its comfort but also, I think, because it names so well the uncomfortable truth that life is not easy, even a life lived following the Good Shepherd. A faithful life does not mean and *has never meant* that bad things will never happen. A faithful life means that we believe that God leads us through the bad. Like a shepherd who cares for his sheep and protects them from danger, God cares for us and provides for us and does not abandon us even in the darkest parts of our lives.

Today I want to take a closer look at three images in this psalm, because they highlight both the tragedy and the hope of life. I offer them today because the words we know and love do not convey the original Hebrew all that well. In revisiting and exploring the original meaning, we are led deeper into the beautiful truth that the Good Shepherd loves us and cares for us, and will always be with us.

The first of these images to explore occurs in verse two: "he maketh me to lie down in green pastures." The Hebrew for lying down is quite particular: it means to sprawl, to stretch oneself out. It's an even better and more comforting image than we think. This is full-body-on-the-ground, completely trusting in someone else to look after your welfare. This is utter contentment and trust, true rest.

Many years ago Jenn and I had a hobby farm. We had goats and sheep, and so in the spring we often had lambs and kids. It was a little alarming to look out the kitchen window and see a lamb or kid lying absolutely still, on its side, in the middle of the pasture. At first I needed to go outside to check on them, to see if they were okay. Inevitably, they were. A lamb- or a dog- lying down on its side on a sunny day is not a sick animal. It's a content animal, one completely at peace with its surroundings, utterly unconcerned with predators or hunger. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures" is *that* kind of lying down. The Good Shepherd invites us to sprawl in safe places, to soak up peace and contentedness, not needing to do anything or be anything other than a soul belonging to God.

The second image to explore comes from verse four: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." You see, the Hebrew doesn't say "valley of the shadow of death." This is a place where the King James Bible gave the English-speaking Church an absolute gift in its mistranslation. The original Hebrew word there is *tzalamut*, deep darkness. The editors read it as two words: *tzal mavet*, the shadow of death. This breaking apart of one word- *tzalamut*- into two words- *tzal mavet*- names the darkness in a powerful way. Death casts a shadow on our lives, whether that shadow comes from grief at the death of a loved one or from fear of our own or our loved ones' death.¹

How much stronger, then is the declaration that I will fear no evil while walking through this valley, not just a dark valley but a valley overcast with the shadow of death, the spectre of grief and the paralyzing fear of disaster. I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Even the shadow of death cannot make me fear, because the Shepherd leads me through.

Through. Part of this imagery that I did not appreciate until recently is the preposition *through*- "though I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death." The psalmist knows that the death-dark valley is not a permanent state of being but rather a period of

¹ Kushner 86

time. What a promise to those of us who are in the valley right now. When what we sense all around is the valley of the shadow of death, the psalmist proclaims- promises- that we don't *live* here. It's part of the journey, but it is not where we end. It is not a permanent state. We walk through grief, we walk through worry, we walk through despair and sadness, but we are not alone "for Thou art with me," and because the Good Shepherd leads us we will not stay there forever.

The third and, for me, most surprising image comes from verse three: the King James Version says "he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness," and our own Book of Common prayer says "he leads me in right pathways." Some translations use "straight paths." Paths of righteousness, right pathways, straight paths- I have an image of straight roads easy to follow. But as Kushner explains in his book on the Twenty-Third Psalm, that's not what the Hebrew says at all. The Hebrew "literally means 'roundabout ways that end up in the right direction.'"² The Shepherd leads us in the right direction, but the path isn't straight. There may be bends and turns, which is exactly *why* we need a guide.

This makes more sense to me. When I picture the hills and valleys of the Holy Land, I do not imagine straight lanes easily followed. The shepherd leads the sheep on the *right* paths, and the right paths are rarely straight, just as the straight, *easy-looking* paths are rarely right. If it were easy to get through the valleys, why would we need a shepherd?

Psalm 23 helps me visualize a life of being led, of trusting the Good Shepherd to lead me, guide me, give me rest, and comfort me. These images, broken open in new ways by the Hebrew text, offer new insights and brighter, more colorful pictures to illumine my prayers. I want to be the lamb stretched out in absolute contentment and safety on a green pasture in the presence of the Lord. I need to know that the valley of grief and worry, darkness and death, is not the land where I live but a passage *through* which the Shepherd leads me. And I joy in the image of a shepherd carefully leading the sheep through valley

² Kushner 72

and hill, around pits and over rocks, navigating the challenges of a dangerous world and calling us to follow close.

The Twenty-Third Psalm is not a rosy portrait of a life of ease- frankly that doesn't cut it for me, doesn't cut it for most of us who have lived. God does not promise an easy life but a shepherd who stays with us always and who leads us *through* the dark places on sometimes unimaginably circuitous paths that end up being right in the end.

So where are we being led, right now? Always towards light, towards hope, towards abundance and peace. Rarely in a straight road. Not always along grassy green hills and still waters. We'll just as often find ourselves in dark valleys of worry, shadows, or grief. But even there, *especially there*, we are led by the Shepherd, by the one who loves us exactly as we are, calls us by name, and bids us to follow. AMEN.