

The Book of Psalms is a book of poetry, which was used as the “prayer” of “service” book in the ancient Israelite Temple. Composed of 150 poems, Rev. Eugene Peterson writes that, they form are a “prayer book that gives us a language adequate for responding to the God who speaks to us.” They can teach us how to pray. Psalm 23 is a prayer of orientation, singing of trust and confidence in Yahweh the LORD. As OT Scholar Patrick Miller writes, “One does not need to have much familiarity with the life or work of a shepherd to feel the power of the imagery of this psalm. It speaks to deep human need, even for those whose personal experience has no point of contact with the images that are presented.”

The psalmist presents God with two metaphorical images: First as a shepherd in verses 1 to 4. A positive image reinforcing the presentations of God as a rock, refuge, supporting arms who can be trusted and counted upon. Knowing God as shepherd is implied to lead to a state of not having want, or lacking. This shepherd punctuates the entire breadth of the Bible, in particular in Isaiah 40, Ezekiel 34 and our gospel reading of John 10 which identifies Jesus as the good shepherd, the living God in whom we can put our trust.

The second image is one of host in verses 5 to 6, who generously and richly provides for the one singing the psalm prayer. This amazing God can provide a welcoming, nourishing table even in the midst of the desert – or the total darkness – images of utter lack and total need.

**shepherd** : This metaphor is common in the First Testament, in particular in Psalm 95:7; Isaiah 40:11; and Ezekiel 34:11-16: It seems to be have been an established metaphor for leadership as even Mot (a foreign god adversary to YHWH) is described as the shepherd of Sheol [Hades or Hell] Psalm 49:15.

**Want**<sup>†</sup> : Or “I shall not lack.” The Hebrew verb *hasar*: to want, to lack used here without any direct object, such as food, help, is unusual. It occurs only one other time in the Bible in Nehemiah 9:21 in reference to Israel’s experience of God’s care in the wilderness: “Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they **lacked** nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.”

**still waters** : or “tranquil” the metaphor of richness of water is echoed in the waters of baptism and also elsewhere in the Psalms, such as Psalm 65:12-13.

**the darkest valley** : also translated as “the Valley of the Shadow of Death”, conveying the idea of total darkness.

**table**: It seems to echo Psalm 78:17-19 which talks about the bounty that God provided for the Israelites in the desert with the manna and quail. <sup>17</sup> Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. <sup>18</sup> They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. <sup>19</sup> They spoke against God, saying, ‘Can God spread a **table** in the wilderness?’”

## SCRIPTURES FOR

SUNDAY 8.27.2017

### Psalm 23

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

A Psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup> The Lord **YHWH** is my **shepherd**,  
I shall not **want**<sup>†</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside **still waters**;

<sup>3</sup> He restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name’s sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through **the darkest valley**,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a **table** before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you **anoint** my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and **mercy** **SHALL FOLLOW ME**  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord **YHWH**  
my whole life long.

John 10:1-18

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the  
sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a

**Mercy** :or “covenantal loyalty.” In Canaanite myths, from the other religions in the ancient land of Israel, gods were portrayed as regularly accompanied by 2 messengers. Here this attendant duo of mercy and goodness could be seen as an adaptive and subversive use of this metaphor.

**SHALL FOLLOW ME:** or “shall pursue me” The Hebrew verb means both “to follow” and “to pursue.” It is commonly used to describe the enemies that pursue one dedicated to God. Is this a subversive twist on the familiar theme in lament psalms of being pursued by enemies, a fear replaced by the promise of being pursued by God’s goodness and promise?

### Other Principal 1<sup>st</sup> Testament passages talking of YHWH as a shepherd:

#### **Isaiah 40:11:**

<sup>11</sup> [YHWH] will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.

#### **Ezekiel 34:11-16.**

<sup>11</sup> For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup> As **shepherds** seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. <sup>13</sup> I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. <sup>14</sup> I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the **shepherd** of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. <sup>16</sup> I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

### Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

- **What shimmers for you in this passage?**
- **Read it again. What phrase or image most speaks to you today?**
- **When have you heard this psalm before? What has it meant to you before?**
- **How does it utter a good news word to you in regards to whatever you’re living today as you may struggle to put your trust in God as a shepherd guide or as one who invites you to his table?**

thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup> The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup> The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”  
<sup>6</sup> Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup> So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, **I am the gate for the sheep.** <sup>8</sup> All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> **I am the gate.** Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.  
<sup>11</sup> **“I am the good shepherd.** The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> **I am the good shepherd.** I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Some textual notes taken from Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*