

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Good Shepherd

April 22, 2018

Psalm 23

Our Comfort for All Times and Under All Conditions

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Dearly loved by God in Christ Jesus, our Good Shepherd:

Some actors and actresses fear typecasting. Because they play a particular type, will that be the one and only role others offer in the future? I'll suggest something similar with the 23rd Psalm. King David's two-dimensional faith view, now and in the future, may be typecast as a funeral psalm. It takes a featured role in the Order of Christian Funeral in our hymnal; and rightly so. David's inspire words have comforted and consoled numerous generations of grieving believers.

Psalm 23 is so much more. It is a wonderful wedding psalm. It is good for confirmation. It is a "go to" psalm for hospital visits. Pastors have to resist the temptation to limit its use, or foolishly think "I'm using this too much, better find something different."

The church has appointed Psalm 23 for Good Shepherd Sunday. Good choice. These simple but powerful and familiar words from the Holy Spirit grant **Our Comfort for All Times and Under all Conditions**. David recalls the mercy and loving kindness of God. These make us confident and consoled children of God.

The Old and New Testaments often use the picture of a Good Shepherd for God, Jehovah, in general, and the Savior in particular. The prophets Micah, Ezekiel, Zechariah speak this way. We heard Jesus use it of himself in our gospel. St. Peter called Jesus "the shepherd and overseer of your souls" in his first epistle. Luther wrote, "This metaphor is one of the most beautiful and comforting and yet most common of all in Scripture, when it compares his divine Majesty with a pious, faithful or—as Christ says—"good Shepherd."

King David recalls the mercy and loving kindness of God, the Good Shepherd. He knows us. We know him. David's speaks from a personal faith in God who loved him and forgave him his sins of murder and adultery. "The LORD is my shepherd." Go ahead. Dare to make that pronoun your own. The LORD is my shepherd. He loves me and has forgiven my sins of murder, adultery, and all the others.

That loving shepherd gives us mercy and loving kindness , our comfort for all times and under all circumstances. David pictures these specific benefits as the care the good shepherd gives to his flock. He makes me lie down in luscious, verdant pastures. These are all the benefits temporal and spiritual he endows in Christ. He leads me to waters that are still and soothing, not roaring and foaming. This is our rest, our peace, our contentment in Christ.

He restores my soul. Christ takes me from death in my trespasses and sins. He gives me new life in his sacrifice for me on the cross declared complete in his resurrection from death and the grave. This is my new birth at the baptismal font, or through the preaching of the Word of Christ.

The Good Shepherd leads me on the right paths. These are the paths that lead to my destination of heaven. They are the narrow way not the broad roads that lead to destruction. They are mysterious at times, as God leads us on them. But as we sing in the hymn, Be Still My Soul, "All now mysterious shall be bright at last."

We see all of this with David in the "now lens" of our faith. The other lens is the "then" lens. To put it another way, we have one foot in the now and one in the then. As we travel that right path to the house of the Lord forever, God's mercy and loving kindness make us confident and consoled children of God.

David switches the picture from being a sheep under the Good Shepherd to being a wanderer. As we wander through the valley of death, literally, darkness, the shepherd's staff supports us. Darkness includes all the heartache, disappointment, sufferings and correction we experience on the way to the glorious table the LORD sets for us in the heavenly banquet hall.

The valley of darkness does include the inevitability of death. We do not fear that evil or any evil because the LORD is with us in his presence. His rod and staff are the means of grace, the gospel of Christ, in Word and sacrament. They support us by giving us spiritual fortitude and stamina. The means of grace that endow God's mercy and loving kindness are what give us comfort and consolation.

Where are we headed through this valley? To the banquet of eternal and perfect righteousness and glory. The LORD seats us at the table where our enemies cannot join. They are on the outside looking in. We finally are safe from the devil, the unbelieving world. The sinfulness of our flesh remains behind when our bodies rise from death and our temporary resting places. "Final resting place" is an awful and untrue description of the place we await Christ's return after we die.

The LORD fills our cup of salvation over the brim. He anoints us with the oil of gladness for celebration. As we look back on our journey to "dwell in the house of the LORD forever" we see nothing but his "goodness and mercy" that followed us through life. The LORD meant and used everything on our journey to accomplish his eternal purpose of gathering us into our heavenly house. There we will live without end.

Since our material glorified bodies will be on the material new earth we do not want to limit David's words to picture language. We may very well eat and drink in heaven, not out of necessity but out of pure pleasure. It would be evidence of our new life just as Jesus ate the fish and honeycomb Easter night.

Psalm 23 is the broad Christian worldview of the two kingdoms we inhabit; the now in this world and the then in the house of the LORD forever. The walk is our present reality. Dwelling safely is our future expectation. In both realities "the LORD is my Shepherd. I lack nothing." Amen. <SDG>