

The Psalm That Calms

A Reflection on Psalm 23

Psalm 23 John 10:11-13, 22-30
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The world in which we live is a miraculously wonderful place. But often it is also very detrimental to our state of well-being – to our very lives. The world has a way of draining our energy, robbing us of the joy of living, and depleting our lives of a sense of wonder. We, therefore, are in continual need of rest and renewal and restoration for our bodies, minds, and spirits – our very souls.

Anxiety, fear, confusion, anger, worry, and the like, all contribute to one of our deepest desires to find not only some peace and quiet, but also a very real sense of calmness in our hectic lives.

What do you do to calm yourself? Often, one of the most effective tools is to simply pause and take a deep breath. While being careful to not fall into the trap of avoidance and escapism in an effort to numb the pain in our lives, it's often helpful to simply walk away for a while, to temporarily set aside those things that cause us anxiety.

One of the most effective tools in my “calming belt” is to listen to beautiful and relaxing music. I currently have over 130 GB of music on my home computer – and for those of you who know computers, that's one heck of a lot of music.

I also find calm when I play with my dog, Angel, or take her for a walk, especially to the park. A good long drive in the country always helps as well, as does reading a good book. And as I experienced a couple of weeks ago when I spent several days of vacation alone in the hills near the Smoky Mountain National Park in Tennessee, just the simple act of not listening to any national or local news for a while did wonders in lowering my sense of frustration and anxiety.

Let me ask the question again, What brings calmness to your life? Former newspaper sports reporter, current TU law student, and church member, Derek Weinbrenner, blogged just this week on his Facebook page about the calming effects of going out to the ballpark to soak up the experience of watching a baseball game in person. In Derek's post, entitled “The Church of Baseball,” a line taken from the movie Bull Durham, he went as far as making a fairly detailed comparison of this national pastime activity with the calming imagery that is found in Psalm 23.

Derek, you had no idea that I was planning to base my sermon this Sunday on Psalm 23, but I will now be reading *all* of your blogs for guidance in my upcoming sermon preparation.

Derek actually brings up a very important point in his reflection upon this familiar psalm – **it is in and through our faith in God that so many of us also find a sense of comfort and calmness when we find ourselves battered by the stormy waters of life.**

Chances are that at one time or another in your life you have either memorized the **23rd Psalm** or are at least very, very familiar with it. It is indeed one of the best known

and best loved passages in the entire Bible – and that has been the case for several thousand years.

Why do you suppose that is? At one level, part of the answer has to be that **throughout time these words have had the ability to speak deeply to people's hearts and minds and souls.** Perhaps like no other passage of scripture passage, this Psalm has provided **comfort in times of sorrow and grief, strength in times of fear and danger, and calm in times of anxiety and worry.** So in answering the question, "What helps brings a sense of comfort, strength and calmness to your life?" many find themselves turning to Psalm 23.

Perhaps first and foremost, this psalm that begins with, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," is a **powerful theological statement of confidence and trust in God's sustaining presence and provision.**

Another reason this psalm is so powerful is that it is so **personal and intimate.** The Bible, for the most part, talks theologically more about the community of faith than it does about individual faith. The Old Testament is about the Hebrew *people*. In the New Testament, when the Apostle Paul uses the word, "you," it is almost never singular, but plural, referring to all believers.

Following this trend, we would almost expect this Psalm to begin, "The Lord is *our* Shepherd, we shall not want." But instead it declares, "**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.**" It doesn't get any more personal and individual than that. And of all the shepherd imagery used in the Bible, this is the only passage that uses the personal pronoun, 'my shepherd.'

Personalizing this theological statement about the nature of God has most likely added to the profound calming effect of this psalm. For the psalmist, the Creator of all things isn't just the God of the Hebrew people, but is also *his* God.

This psalm's powerful comforting and calming effect is also attributed to the use of **the metaphor of God being like a shepherd.** The author of the Gospel of John picked up on this metaphor and applied it to Jesus as well. John 10:14 begins, "I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep, and they know me." He adds in verse 27, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." **That's why many of us can talk about a personal relationship with God – a personal experiential reality of the presence of God our their lives.**

The role of a shepherd in the ancient world, much like today, was to guide the sheep to food, water and rest, and away from danger. A good shepherd is all sheep need since by his or her very nature a good shepherd will supply all of the sheep's needs. This image of a shepherd is intended to reveal the caring nature and provision of God.

For the symbol of a shepherd is not a whip, where God whips us into obedience – like a lion tamer at a circus. Yet, unfortunately, many people have this impression of the nature of God – one who punishes and beats us into obedience. But whips don't work on sheep. Instead, **God seeks to bring a calming guidance to our lives, not whip us into fear, as certain religious leaders or particular theologies often seek to do.**

Neither is a shepherd like a dog trainer who can get a dog to do almost any trick because of the promise of a dog biscuit. Yet, also unfortunately, many people have this impression of the nature of God. If you do something good, God will reward you by giving you a divine dog biscuit. On the other hand, if you do bad things, then God will withhold the reward from you.

There are those that teach that in order to get rewarded by God, people must believe and act as they tell them to believe and act. I can think of few things more opposite the teaching of God's grace than this.

For just like whips, biscuits don't work on sheep either. These are not the symbols of a shepherd. Rather, there are two primary symbols of a shepherd. **The first symbol is the staff and the rod.** A shepherd lovingly reaches the big curved end of the staff down into a hole or ravine and slips it under the sheep's legs, gently pulling the sheep out of danger. **The psalmist wants us to view God that way, as helping to pull us out of the holes and ruts that we get ourselves into.**

The rod, as some misinterpret, is *not* used to hit and discipline the sheep, but rather for gentle guidance and for defense; to protect the sheep from predators, like lions and tigers and bears – oh my. There is no doubt that the ancient Israelites looked to God for their protection.

The second primary symbol of the shepherd is the shepherd's voice. Over time, sheep actually get to know the sound of their shepherd's voice. And over the course of the twenty five-year or so lifespan of a sheep, the shepherd would get to know the individual identity of each sheep. **One of the theological points of this psalm, then, is that our God knows us individually by name as well.**

Again, this is picked up in the Gospel of John when he assures us that Jesus knows his sheep and they know his voice. **That is the voice we, as Christian, are to follow, that is the voice that brings comfort, strength and calm in the midst of any life circumstance.**

While there is so much more to say about the Psalm 23, I want to mention just one more very familiar verse that has done so much for so many to bring a sense of calm to their soul. Verse 4 (in the King James Version) begins, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me." There's probably not a person in this country who hasn't heard this passage at the funeral or memorial service of a loved one. Perhaps this was one of the intended interpretations that the psalmist had in mind.

When looking at the original Hebrew language, however, we learn that the single word which was translated as the phrase "**shadow of death**" is actually too narrow of a translation. **A more accurate translation is "deep darkness."** That is why the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (the version of our Pew Bibles) uses the phrase, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley."

This translation gives this psalm a much greater range of meaning, interpretation, and human experience than just dealing with the issue of death, important as that is. **For we all walk through valleys of deep darkness at many different times during our lives** – times of great pain, sorrow, fear, anxiety, danger, crisis, illness and tragedy.

What are the dark valleys that you have walked through in your life? Perhaps you're walking through one right now.

The stark reality of this psalm is the acknowledgment that God does not necessarily prevent us from facing dangers, threats, and dark valleys. Part of the power of this psalm, then, is the realization that the psalmist, like ourselves, has indeed faced very difficult life situations.

The great promise of this psalm, however, is that no matter what the threat or difficulty that we may face in life, God is right there with us. As the psalmist declares, albeit in King James English, "For thou art with me." "God with us", literally in Hebrew,

Emmanuel – a term associated with Jesus. **God and Christ, like a good shepherd, are always with us, are always with you, to provide you with comfort, strength and calm.**

May you experience the calming assurance that even in the valleys of deep darkness, God walks before us and behind us, above us and below us, beside us and within us.

Amen.