

Because of the familiarity of the 23rd Psalm in our culture, it is sometimes difficult to comprehend its meaning until we hear it again, in a new way. Much like the farmer living by a country road on the edge of town, who was increasingly concerned by speeding traffic. Worried that he and his livestock were in danger he called the sheriff and asked them to put up a sign. They put up a 'Slow' sign but it had no effect. They tried putting up a 'Pedestrian Crossing' sign, but that had no effect either. Finally they tried installing a 'Children at Play' sign, but the traffic still kept whizzing past. Eventually the farmer asked if he could put up his own sign and the sheriff agreed. A few days later a deputy stopped by to see how things were going. He was amazed to see the traffic moving at a snail's pace; then he noticed the farmer's home-made sign by the roadside, it read, 'Nudist Colony.'

As the most well-known and frequently quoted piece of scripture in all the Bible, Psalm 23 is truly a psalm for all seasons. The pastoral images that dominate the beginning of the psalm describe a journey that God oversees and guides. The rest in green pastures is a temporary respite; this psalmist is on the go, walking beside the water, along paths, and through

valleys. Now I grew up in a little town in north central Oklahoma where farming was a way of life for many. In farming communities, green pastures is better understood as green acres, where crops grow as far as the eye can see and the pace of life moves a little slower; the kind of life sought by Oliver Douglas in the 60s sit-com titled "Green Acres." The former high-powered New York City attorney sought a simpler, easier life on a farm in Hooterville, and his wife Lisa, a displaced Park Avenue socialite, cheerfully supported her husband's doomed efforts to enjoy the countryside. Ironically, despite her resistance to the move, she was the one who actually flourished in the small rural community (though she never mastered making edible hotcakes).

To fully appreciate Psalm 23, it is important to understand that it was also a cherished hymn for the Hebrew people. Craig Barnes wrote an article in the *Christian Century* about how it is wise to remember the nature of the Jews' history with God. They were a people called Israel who struggled for a home that they were always trying to get into, hold onto, or get back. They struggled for peace, for food, and for a future. Most important, they struggled for their faith in God.

The Hebrew people longed to live with God as sheep live with a shepherd, but their life was hard. And they were too afraid to keep

believing that this Shepherd was leading them to green pastures (or green acres), or that goodness and mercy would always follow them. So they frequently rushed down what they thought were more promising paths toward more manageable gods, which always led them into unmanageable trouble and laments for the salvation of God. Then they would return to worship, where this story was told and retold. It is not surprising that so many of the psalms describe the churning, disruptive experience of being lost and found, judged and forgiven, sent away, and brought back. It is all part of the pathos of people who got scared and lost their way, and of the drama of a God who searches to find the lost sheep.

We struggle, too. Psalm 23 appeals to us with its images of green pastures, still waters, and overflowing cup because we also strive for equilibrium, security, and abundance. In the hustle and bustle and struggles of life, we long for "Calgon to take me away." We want, and need, the image of a shepherd in our lives guiding us, protecting us, and reassuring us. We need to be sought out when we are lost, carried when we are bruised and broken, and cared for when we are sick. The 23rd Psalm appeals to us with these images because we struggle to find that kind of security in life. These images speak to the deep places within our souls because things are not always well with our souls. We live daily in a

context That Douglas John Hall describes as “the kingdom of death”—that is, we are constantly surrounded by forces that diminish the abundant life that God intends.

The psalm begins with a simple profession, “the Lord is my shepherd.” In the ancient world, kings were often known as the shepherd of their people, and it was the responsibility of kings to provide for and protect the people, but they frequently failed to do so. In contrast to the failure of earthly kings, God does what a shepherd is supposed to do: provide life and security for the people. Thus, the psalmist makes a declaration of loyalty to God and affirms that living under God’s reign means “I shall not want,” or better translated as “I shall lack nothing.” But wait, “I shall not want”? Our whole life seems to be about wanting. Indeed, it may be that greed is one of the primary “forces of tyranny.” James Limburg writes, “In our consumer culture, I *shall* want, I shall always want. I shall never stop all my wanting because ads entice me with ever new, shiny, unnecessary objects, and I am instructed from childhood on to want—and not merely to want, but to *have*.” When infectious greed for stuff fills our lives instead of satisfaction with God, we have lost our way.

The Lord is my shepherd and I shall lack nothing. But wait, there are lots of people in this world who lack even the basic necessities of life—

food, clean water, and shelter. How is it that the psalm can make this bold claim of abundance in the midst of scarcity? Perhaps because the problem is not with God, the problem lies with humanity and human nature. God's world provides plenty of resources for all God's people; the real problem lies with a small portion of the population using more of those resources than they really need, thereby creating a distinction between the "haves" and the "have nots." The problem is not one of scarcity, but of sharing (or lack thereof). God's habitat for humanity is filled with abundance, but when we become so concerned with individualism that we forget the collective good to which we are called to be a part of caring for, we have lost our way.

We, like sheep, often go astray, and we get scared. The late psychologist Rollo May wrote, "Humans are the strangest of all God's creatures, because they run the fastest when they have lost their way." This is how we get into real trouble—by running when we are lost. It is then that we make some of the worst mistakes with relationships, family, and work. The same could also be said of churches, schools, and governments. Not convinced that the Lord is leading us to green pastures, we veer off course, try a short cut, or run like terrified sheep. Trying so hard to find ourselves, we've even lose sight of who we are and who we

were created to be. Psalm 23 reminds us, like it did the Hebrew people, that in spite of our "lostness," God is still faithful in finding us and restoring us to be the people God intended us to be. The first part of verse 6 is better translated from Hebrew as "May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life." Thus it's not the enemies in hot pursuit. Instead, only God's goodness and mercy will follow me, or better yet, translated as "actively pursue me," all the days of my life so that I can dwell in the habitat for God's humanity.

In *God is Our Grateful Center*, Patricia Farris reminds us, "Our God has given us a home." The psalmist calls it the House of the Lord; it is the habitat for humanity. The House of the Lord lacks for nothing. It is a place of abundance and beauty. In contrast to the parched places of our lives, it is a place of vibrant and nourishing green pastures. In contrast to the noise of our daily lives and frazzled spirits, it is a place of deep, still waters where we are carried to the wellsprings of our faith. In contrast to the futile desperation of endless seeking after the latest thing, the newest, hippest, coolest, whatever, when we are at home with God, we know that our cup is already filled and overflowing. To be in our grateful center, to dwell in the house of the Lord, is to be rooted and grounded in the love of God. Henri Nouwen observed that many people live as if we've forgotten our

address and are living at the wrong place—living in the house of fear instead of the house of the Lord.

The key to discovering this salvation is recognizing that “God is with me.” That is how David survived the valley of the shadow of death when he was on the run from Saul. Believing God is with us is how we get through tough times. Phillip Keller Phillip Keller, in his book "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23," noted, “The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very make-up, it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless certain requirements are met. Owing to their timidity, they refuse to lie down unless they are free from all fear. As prey animals they are very susceptible to stress. Sheep want to feel safe and protected. Because of the social behavior within a flock, sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with other sheep. If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when free of these pests can they relax. Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. It is the job of the shepherd to make it possible for them to lie down, to relax, to be content, and quiet, and flourishing. A flock that is restless, discontented, always agitated and disturbed never does well. And the same is true of people.” Perhaps that is why the psalmist writes the line in verse 2 that is better translated from Hebrew to read, God “causes me to lie

down in green pastures.” This is the role of the Spirit of God, which lives inside us and is always with us, in every grassy pasture and every dark valley. Even in the times of refreshing, like sheep, we humans, can still be finicky, can still be agitated, scared, and ready to run. As the physical presence of the shepherd calmed and reassured the sheep, so the presence of the Holy Spirit should always be that calming and reassuring presence for us. It takes a shepherd, the good shepherd, to provide all that we need to be secure in this world. And it takes us saying “yes” to that profession “the Lord is my shepherd.”

It is important that Psalm 23 be heard and understood as a psalm about living, for these brief six verses address some of the most basic and common physical, emotional, and spiritual needs we share as human beings. This psalm addresses God’s habitat for humanity and calls us to life, lived as God intends in humble gratitude and in solidarity with God’s world-encompassing household.

Given the prevalence of images of travelling through the psalm, it is most appropriate to read the last line as “I will continually return to God’s presence, my whole life long.” Thus the journey does not end at the end of the psalm. Rather, seeking after God’s presence is a lifelong enterprise, a long-term journey. Instead of being compelled to consume, we are set free

to share, quite literally, for God's sake—to share our food, our drink, our sources of security, and to share even with the enemies who are with us at the table God prepares. God's grace overflows into us so we may offer clean, still waters to all; shelter for those who sleep rough; food for those who are hungry; companionship to those who wander shadowed valleys; and an open gate to those longing for a community. While the Douglas's life on the farm in Hooterville consisted of a ramshackle house with a leaking roof and a phone that sat high up on a pole, they were surrounded by an entire community, a rather large supporting cast (including a pig named Arnold Ziffel) that somehow made it a judgment free zone filled with love. The Lord is my shepherd and Green Acres is the place to be....Amen.