

Shepherd, Lamb, and King

Psalm 23; John 10:22-31

One of the features of the psalms of David is that often David's identity as the king and savior of his own people in his own day look forward to what Jesus would be in his own turn a thousand years later. And the Twenty Third Psalm is one of the more complicated and involved instances of David singing both about and for himself in real time, and singing about Jesus, who would fulfill David's mission a thousand years after him. The word "christ" means anointed and David was anointed by Samuel to be Israel's savior and king in an era when no other man had been able to lead and save Israel.

And David was an odd choice, not big and strong and domineering like old King Saul had been. David was the youngest son in his family, never proven in combat, more given to music and poetry than most people imagined a king should be. But God chose him and the prophet Samuel anointed him and David became both savior and king despite all appearances to the contrary. But he continued to be odd because ancient people everywhere and particularly in Israel thought of themselves as sheep and their kings as shepherds. They wanted take-charge characters with big sticks and an air of confidence about them that David didn't always project.

After all, David opened the Twenty Third Psalm not claiming to be a shepherd at all! "*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*," David sang. Which was strange because if Israel ever had a shepherd, David was it. He had been a shepherd by trade before God called him as a king. David had faced and conquered every enemy in sight, extending the boundaries of Israel out to the boundaries Moses had set for Eden way back in Genesis. Even with all his sins, fallen though he was, David led Israel with a sort of strength and honesty and compassion that would only be surpassed by Jesus.

And yet what David sings here is that Israel's shepherd needed a Shepherd. "*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul...*," David sings. The point being that rulers and saviors in a kingdom set by God must first need God, must first belong to God. And David knew the score. The first, necessary, essential ingredient to being human is to know that we are small, physical, vulnerable pictures of what it's like to be God. We were made to rule the universe where God placed us.

We were meant to perfect this "*very good*" world God made for us. But none of us is complete none of us is entirely capable unless and until we are willing to let God be God and lead us and take care of us. Because God's leading and his taking care of us go hand in hand. "*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.*" The restoring

David sings about is perhaps not so much about us being healed and helped as it is about our being brought back into the fold. He “restores” us in the sense that he brings us home when we get lost.

“He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” What David is singing is that God has two reasons to nurture us so kindly and lead us so firmly. The first is that he loves us. Paul writes in Romans that *“... God commends his own love towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* So God’s love for us is beyond question! But there’s one thing he loves more than us and that is his own good name. God shepherds us on a righteous path because his own good name is at stake in how we behave and what becomes of us. God stands for something and if we’re going to belong to him, then he’ll make sure that we stand for what he stands for.

Because shepherds don’t just nurture and feed and protect their sheep, they navigate for them. To be a sheep, to belong to a flock is to follow where the Shepherd leads, to trust the Shepherd to get us to the right place. And so, as a practical matter, what David sings in this first stanza should have been reassuring to the people who heard it. Because what it meant is that they were being led by a person who himself was being led by God. A king in the ancient world was a terrifying personage precisely because, humanly speaking, there was no one with the power to hold him accountable.

But God sets us right and guides us away from our own worst impulses. And as he does this, God also guards us against these shadows that could engulf us if we weren’t in his company, on the path he set for us. So David sings: *“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”* The point being that taking God as a Shepherd doesn’t spare us the danger and difficulty that comes with life in a fallen world. We have to face the shadows, trusting that God is with us when life goes dark and sinister. David's second stanza sings of what it means for God to anoint David as king.

It turns out that David’s ascent to the throne was anything but peaceful and straightforward. So David sings: *“You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”* We learn from David’s life story and from the life story of Jesus in the gospels that we become what God has called us to be, we learn to rule and keep and guard his kingdom on earth, only by siding with God against the Serpent and against the lies that inspired his insurrection.

Because since the Fall, this world and every soul making his way toward God is contended ground. It follows that no one will do any good, no one will save his soul or help anyone else without making enemies. We will have to contend with and be tempted by evil. The good news being that what is true for you and me and David was also true for Christ. For Jesus to be king,

he had to be anointed by God's Spirit and become small and take his Father as a Shepherd. The first thing John the Baptist said about Christ is, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!*"

Which means not only that Jesus died for us, but also that his whole life was just like ours, he was a lamb, a sheep in his Father's care. Which ought to reassure us, because it means that when Christ commands us to love and trust and follow him, he is asking of us only what he had to do with his Father. To find green pastures and still waters, to make his way on a straight and narrow righteous path, Jesus had to trust and obey and follow his Father.

The Lord was his Shepherd, who made him do what was right and hard so that we could be forgiven and saved and find Christ to be our Shepherd in our turn. And he's a good shepherd because he's been and done everything he will ask us to do and be. He knows his way through the shadows and out the other side, because he trusted his father to show him the way.