

Sermon: The Lord is My Shepherd

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, April 21, 2024.
The sermon is inspired by the theological reflection of Michael Lodahl,
as published in the *Feasting on the Word*.)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What would it be like to read Psalm 23 over the shoulder of Jesus? What would it be like to pray this beloved Psalm, as Jesus would've and most likely did, many times over? The Twenty-Third Psalm requires no introduction and very little explanation. This beautiful Psalm has ingrained itself into the corporate prayer and devotion of the church. It has ingrained itself also into the personal and intimate lives of believers, as it has undoubtedly comforted many souls over sleepless nights and uncertain days. "*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*"

It is the most well known Psalm of all 150 of them; the most memorized (I know I did, in Mandarin, Taiwanese and English); and the most cherished. It clearly sets the I-Thou relationship where I am (we are) the sheep and God is the Great Shepherd who is leading us to green pastures, to still waters through the path of righteousness, and on this path I shall fear no evil.

I don't need to tell you that I love this Psalm, you know. I don't need to tell you that you love this Psalm also, I know. So would it come as a surprise to know that Jesus also loved Psalm 23? Even though he did not quote from it directly, this psalm of David may have shaped the prayer life of Jesus in more ways than we could imagine.

The Gospel reading today, in this Easter season, rightly steer us to think of the living Christ as our Shepherds, as he said so in John 10:11, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" But long before the disciples and later the church came to such an understanding, Jesus may have pray this prayer of Psalm 23, on his lips and in his heart many times over, as one who trusts the God of Israel as his shepherd, his leader and guide. After all, further down in John 10, Jesus

explains how this relationship comes together, *“I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father.”* Jesus can be our good shepherd simply because he enjoyed the good shepherding of God, of God as the Shepherd of Israel.

So, just like all other prayers we as Christians pray, we pray this psalm through Jesus, and in the name of Jesus. We sing it to the tune of his life and ministry, his death and resurrection. Because this psalm is true for Jesus, and true in Jesus, it has become true for us.

*“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name’s sake.”*

The word righteousness in Hebrew is *tsedeq*. It carries the connotation of normal, right and just. These are not just any paths, but the right paths. The Lord leads the faithful down the right paths, not only for their benefit, but for the sake of God’s name. For the name of God is to be glorified, and glorified by the faithful in all the earth.

Because we pray this psalm through Jesus, we are reminded that the right paths do not guarantee perpetual serenity. We have, from time to time, the tendency to romanticize the metaphor of shepherd with the sheep in idilic green pasture, but we only need to recall Jesus in Gethsemane, to recall his prayer then, to be reminded of a harsher and a more realistic assessment of life as the people of God.

It is not insignificant that Jesus prayed, *“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me”* (Matthew 26:39) The path to the cross is not for the lighthearted nor the fainthearted. What then is the implication here of a forsaken lamb, desperately seeking the comfort of the divine Shepherd’s rod and staff?

Could we not say that Jesus becomes our shepherd only because, as the author of Hebrews describes in 5:8, that *“he learned obedience by the*

things which He suffered." It is only when we are able to truly hear his desperate cry that we can appreciate his humble concession to the divine will, "*nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.*" It is only then we can truly pray that 'God leads me in right paths for the sake of God's name'. We can say it and pray it, knowing that because God has led the one we call Saviour to precisely such a path.

Likewise, we can imagine Jesus as he bore the cross to Calvary, muttering in his belaboured breath this prayer, "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*" Here the psalmist uses a key word to illustrate the deceptive quality of evil. It is not the valley of death, but the valley of the death shadow, or *tsalmaveth* in Hebrew. The Septuagint translates this phrase as "in the midst of the shadow of death". In other instance, the phrase is translated as "total darkness". The word *tsalmaveth* appears a number of times in the Book of Job, describing the terrible ordeal he had endured. Death has not yet come, but its shadow casts over the faithful, creating an unbearable darkness of despair.

In the midst of such despair, one is often tempted to question God, to question the presence of God or to lament the absence of God, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" Yet, it is precisely at such moment, this prayer of Psalm 23 shines, "*Yea, 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.*" Jesus was not alone, in that valley of death shadow. Precisely because he was shepherd by God, we can count on Jesus to be our shepherd in our own valley of shadows of death. And thanks be to God.

Yes, Jesus did taste death, and it was bitter beyond belief. Yes he was crucified, died and was buried; and descended to hell. Yet, it was not the end, for on the third day, he rose again from the dead, and as affirmed by the Apostles' Creed, that Jesus ascended to heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.

In light of what we confess in the Apostles' Creed, Psalm 23:5-6 gives us a deeper understanding of the resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ. Precisely as the Christ, the anointed, it is his head above all others that is anointed with oil. It is his cup that is overflowing, and that runneth

over to ours. Therefore, during the Eucharist, we recall his pledge to the disciples, “*for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.*” (Luke 22:18) So we partake with hearts full of thanksgiving, “*proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes*” (1 Corinthians 11:26). We await with gleeful anticipation of that great messianic table where God is preparing for his anointed (and the countless, too numerous to count, of table guests).

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people,
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain,
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the covering that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.” (Prophecy of Isaiah 25:6-8)

When we read Psalm 23 as a prayer, we must first read it as Jesus’ own prayer. The intimacy of this psalm is not ours to claim but is first ascribed to the relationship between Jesus and the one he called “Abba, Father”. It is not ours to claim, except in and through Jesus, because Jesus has made Psalm 23 his own prayer. Only in Jesus and through Jesus, can we pray, “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me, all the days of my life.*” Only in and through Jesus, who has “*died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God*” (Romans 6:10), can we confidently assert, as the psalmist concludes, “*and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.*” For in my Father’s house there are indeed many rooms (John 14:2).

Yes the Lord is my Shepherd. In and through Jesus, who is our Lord and Saviour, the Twenty-Third Psalm thus becomes our prayer, and our souls are thus restored. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**