



April 13, 2008

Focus scripture
Psalm 23

Additional scriptures
Acts 2:42–47
1 Peter 2:19–25
John 10:1–10

You restore us,
Holy One, with
waters that quench
and food that
nourishes. You lead
us to shelter that
protects us and
paths that right us.
You are at the be-
ginning and at the
end; may we trust
your shepherding
in all the times and
ways between.
Amen.

Life Abundant

God shepherds by providing all that we need, which is not the same as all we may want. The good shepherd does not abandon us in times of suffering and danger. God stands with those who enter and dwell in such places. Even there, especially there, God leads as a companion whose presence may still our fears. God's steadfast love is trustworthy. Always.

Focus Scripture: Psalm 23

The beauty of this psalm is deepened by layers of symbolism about shepherds in Judaism. Shepherds were away from community and worship ritual for long periods, which led some to view shepherds with suspicion and some to consider them “unclean.” Central to this psalm is that shepherds had long been associated with kings and other public leaders. That symbolism is not always positive. The prophets had charged Israel’s “shepherds” for failing to care for the flock entrusted to them. What do these traditions add to your understanding of the meaning behind this psalmist’s affirmation of God as shepherd?

The voice and structure of the psalm fall into three main sections. Verse 1 opens with a first person (“my,” “I”) declaration of God as shepherd. Verses 2–3 shift to a series of third person (“he”) statements that describe the actions by which God shepherds. Verses 4–6 move into a personal address (“I,” “you”) of God that affirms the results of God’s shepherding. At the centre of the psalm, and the “hinge point” between affirmations and personal address, is this word: “you are with me.” God’s presence is at the core of this psalm, even as the name of God opens and closes its verses. We live and trust in the midst of God’s presence.

Two words merit special attention. “Want” in verse 1 has a meaning in Hebrew closer to “lack.” It is the same word used in Deuteronomy 2:7 and 15:7–8. There, God provides in the wilderness for what the people truly need. The psalm invites distinction between desires and needs for the sake of understanding what God promises to provide. The second word that draws our attention occurs in verse 8. Translated there as “mercy,” the Hebrew *hesed* is a covenant word that has to do with the tenacious

loyalty or fidelity of one partner to another. *Hesed* moves beyond what is obligated for the relationship to whatever needs to be done to sustain it. It is often translated “steadfast love.”

Near its close, the psalm offers the intriguing image of sitting at table with one’s enemies. Is this simply another affirmation of God’s providential care that will keep us safe even in the presence of those who might wish to do us ill? Or is the psalm subtly hinting that another act of God’s providential care is reconciliation of those once estranged? What do you think?

Images of community flow through the other texts. **Acts 2:42–47** portrays the religious and social practices of early Christian community. **1 Peter 2:19–25** addresses a community who knows such suffering as the psalm’s “darkest valley.” **John 10:1–10** witnesses to community gathered by recognition of the One who names them.

The theme of guarding and keeping also mark these texts, along with the psalm. The community’s sharing of goods in **Acts 2:42–47** provides shepherd-like care for the poor and vulnerable. **1 Peter 2:19–25** affirms God in Christ as “shepherd and guardian” in the context of trying times. The image of Jesus in **John 10:1–10** as the “gate of the sheep” suggests sheltering and guarding the flock. Our safe-keeping is promised, even when God’s absence seems more pronounced to us than God’s presence.



God provides for our needs. That truth – not material excess – defines life abundant. What in this psalm is most comforting to you; most puzzling; most promising? In what ways have you experienced God’s shepherding in good times and not-so-good times?

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