

Nourishment for the Journey

Ruminations on Psalm 23

Who among us enjoys being vulnerable? We are a people that likes to be in control, to fend for ourselves, to create our reality, and to not have to rely on anyone else. There are times when we justify our fierce independence from others as trying “not to be a burden” on anyone else. And yet the more likely truth is that we are stubbornly prideful and want to be able to do things for ourselves; especially with the consequent hope that things will get done “our” way.

Given this, it is ironic how beloved Psalm 23 continues to be. It is a Psalm that casts us in the image of sheep (vulnerable, needy, and even “dumb” sheep that cannot seem to look out for themselves), and God in the image of a shepherd who takes care of the sheep. Perhaps our desire to be taken care of and having all our needs fulfilled is just as strong, if not more so, than our desire for independence.

Of course, much of our human reality is at odds with itself. We are well aware that we often want contradictory things. We, too, know that the very things we so desire, once acquired, do not give us the satisfaction and fulfillment that we imagined they would.

I recall as a boy hearing the first verse of this beloved psalm and thinking it was itself contradictory. The way I heard it, God was my shepherd, but I didn’t want God to be my shepherd. Later I learned that “I shall not want” referred to the circumstance of not having anything else I really desired other than God. But I wonder if my boyhood hermeneutics don’t actually make a point. We both want God to be our shepherd, and we also don’t want God to be our shepherd. We are mixed in our thoughts and emotions. We want to be cared for and made safe, but we also want our liberty and independence. God leading us to green pastures and still waters sounds great – until we recognize that it may be in the opposite direction we ourselves would want to go.

Perhaps the strangeness of God “making” me to lie down, as though I have to be forced to do so, is not so far-fetched. If God didn’t make me lie down to rest when I need to, and to relax and take in a long drink of nature’s beauty, I might find myself doing all the things I think I have to get done to live up to my goals – or perhaps even just to keep from being left behind by all the other workaholics in our society.

We have a fear that if we don’t nearly work ourselves to death, we will be left behind. But what does this fear lead us to? Often to illness; as well as a general anxiety that whatever we do, it is never enough. We work ourselves until we literally become sick. We don’t take the time we need to care for ourselves, let alone the time to be taken care of by another.

Psalm 23 reminds us of a counter-cultural ethic and lifestyle that does not conform to our rampant individualism and capitalistic mores. Instead of striving to get ahead, this psalm reminds us that we need to slow down. God needs to “make” us to lie down in green pastures. God needs to lead us beside still waters. If we haven’t learned this already, it is taking this kind of time out for our souls to have a breather that is necessary for us to be refreshed and restored. God can’t restore us if we are unwilling to follow the shepherd’s advice and direction.

But Psalm 23 also reminds us that the paths God leads us to and through are not always idyllic. Indeed, God sometimes leads us through the darkest of valleys; even through the valley of the shadow of death. This is not God’s intent, but it is simply the way of life and the world. Life and the world are complex. None of us gets through them without pain and suffering. Our entry into the world is one of travail, and our ending may be as equally tumultuous. We pray, of course, that everything in between birth and death will be green pastures and still waters, but the reality is, and we all know this, that this simply is not the case.

God does not spare us from the valleys of life that threaten and frighten us. The promise in this psalm is not that God will deliver us from all anguish and suffering, but that God will be with us through it all.

But this promise of God's presence also requires something from us: the ability to trust God, come what may. This is the hard part of being sheep. We'd rather do our own thing. We'd rather do what, in God's eyes, is going astray. We think we are simply looking out for ourselves, but the reality is that when we put more faith in our own ways than God's, we really are disavowing the very faith that we cling to in thinking of God as our shepherd. We can't have it both ways. We'd like to, but we can't. We are a "both...and" sort of society. We not only want our cake and to eat it too; we also want ice cream on the side.

We are not "bad" for having these desires. We are, it could be argued, born with them. And yet, we are a people that has to make choices. Trust is virtually a prerequisite for getting through this life. We have to trust in our parents and care-takers when we are too small and feeble to care for ourselves. And often, later in life, we are again in need of care-takers if we grow too weak and confused to care for ourselves. But during all the other times of our lives, we want control. We want to make the decisions. We want to do what we please. We, perhaps by selfish pride, tend to trust more in ourselves than anyone else – including God. The problem, of course, is that we don't always have the wisdom or the power to make our choices reality. And even when we do, it is not exactly what we thought it'd be like to get what we wanted.

Trusting in God, or anyone for that matter, makes us feel edgy. It makes us feel vulnerable. And yet if we don't trust in someone or something greater than ourselves, we miss one of the greatest blessings of life. Trust gives us a sense of security in an insecure world. It may not keep us from dangers, but neither will trusting in ourselves. Danger and risk are part of life.

But in trusting, which is *not* the same as believing, we accept the fact that we are vulnerable, and this acceptance of our fragility puts things in perspective. We give up thinking we have to be in control. We abandon the notion that life is just and fair, and that we can have whatever we want. We come to understand that wisdom is not always making all the decisions that keeps us out of harm's way, but that reminds us that we are blessed beyond the circumstances we find ourselves in.

We are a people that "needs" to trust in order to be healthy and whole. Without trust, we pit ourselves against the world, and even against God. With trust, we have faith that we are blessed with the perception that others love us and want the best for us – even when our world turns upside down. Trust is its own reward. It offers no guarantees as to what we will achieve or gain in life, or when or how our life will come to an end. But it offers us assurance that no matter what life rolls our way, we know that, even as sheep, we will confront reality with the faith that we are cared for and loved.

When we must have it our own way, and when we can only trust ourselves, we limit the sense of how much we are cared for and loved. Trust opens us up to feeling loved and cared for by others than ourselves.

I am thankful for all the times that I have trusted – trusted God, trusted family, trusted friends, trusted strangers, and even trusted enemies. This is not to say that I haven't been "burned" numerous times. I most certainly have. And yet what I carry from those instances of having trust betrayed and my heart broken is not a cynicism that I should never trust again because of the pain that resulted from having trusted, but rather a realization that I am the better for having trusted in the first place and am empowered in knowing that I am now safely on the other side of that pain and suffering and can now go on to trust yet again.

In trusting, in God and in others, as well as myself, I will again accept my vulnerability (as if I have a choice not to be vulnerable!); but I do so with an awareness that I am not alone. I may be a sheep, but I'm not the only one in the flock. I may not know exactly what pastures and waters lie ahead in the future, but I would rather move forward in faith that a shepherd is leading us there than that we can determine our own fate by following our own desires.

The future looks bright! And it is trust that is leading the way.

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 3/26/2014*