

Session 1: Psalm 23

The Divine Shepherd

A Psalm of David.

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Commentary

The early church sang Psalm 23 as the baptized person emerged from the font and proceeded into the newly illumined church for Eucharist. Contemporary churches turn to this psalm for Holy Communion and funerals, depending whether one stresses the early walk through darkness or the later banquet.

The psalm shows an overlay of covenant traditions about:

- journeying through the wilderness and renewing the covenant;
- the release of an individual from trial (Psalm 121);
- the return from exile (Isaiah 40:1-11; 42:10; Jeremiah 31:10);
- a liturgical ceremony of thanksgiving and sacred meal (Psalm 111; 118).

If we keep the Hebrew reading of 23:6b, "I will return," the psalm is one of confidence; or if we follow the Greek and read "I will dwell," as in Psalm 27:4, the psalm turns into a thanksgiving.

In 23:1b-4, the language is metaphorical about the "Lord, my shepherd" (Genesis 49:24; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:11-31). Yet metaphors gradually give way to realistic expressions:

- "path of righteousness" or "straight path," depending whether one understands the phrase as symbolic or realistic;

- “valley of darkness” is still metaphorical in the first word, realistic in the second;
- “at my side” describes concretely Yahweh’s continual presence.

Psalm 23:5-6 describes a thanksgiving sacrifice and a sacred meal before returning home. Yahweh is no longer the shepherd but the host at home. The final phrase, “the path of one’s days,” recalls the way of obedience that leads to the promised land (Deuteronomy 6) and interior rest (Psalm 95:11).

- Harper Bible Commentary

Questions

1. What “self-help” formulas were you raised with to cope with stress?
2. Read this Psalm again in the negative (“The Lord is not my shepherd...”). What verse is most disturbing? Why?
3. What dark valley do you walk now? How has God rescued or protected you with his “rod and staff?”
4. What “green pastures and still waters” has God brought your way?
5. Who are your “enemies” today? What would you like your cup to overflow with?