

"With the Lord As Our Shepherd, We Are Protected and Provided For"

Text: Psalm 23

5/5/2019

Our text for today is a little different than usually is, because while one of the three assigned Scripture readings for the day usually serves as our sermon text, today that is NOT the case. Today, in addition to being the 3rd Sunday of Easter, is also Good Shepherd Sunday, and so it seems appropriate for us to take a look this day at one of the most beloved, if not THE most beloved passages in all of Scripture: the Shepherd Psalm - Psalm 23 (which the choir sang so beautifully earlier). What we see in Psalm 23, and today's O.T. and Gospel readings as well, is that to have the Lord as one's Shepherd is to be protected and provided for. Let's look at that now together ...

As we do, we return to today's Psalm 1 where we hear again that:

"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. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake."(Psalm 23: 1-3)

So begins one of the best known and most loved passages in all of Scripture. It was written by David, the greatest of Israel's kings, so Psalm 23 is what we may call a "kingly psalm." One of the duties of the kings of God's people 'of old' was to shepherd them. We're told in the book of 1 Chronicles that the Lord said to David:

" ... you shall shepherd My people Israel, ... "(11 :2)

Since this psalm was written by David *after* he had been anointed king of Israel, and since David was a shepherd before he was king, AND AGAIN since Israel's kings were supposed to shepherd them, Psalm 23 is a psalm of a shepherd-king, one who has been called by *THE Shepherd-King Himself- i.e., THE LORD* - to care for *His* people.

We said at the beginning that to have the Lord as one's Shepherd is to be protected and provided for, and we see that in Psalm 23. The psalm says that those shepherded by the Lord "shall not want," and the sense of that is that they will not lack anything they need. Those under the care of the Lord are so provided for that "He makes (them) lie down in green pastures," giving them to eat what is fertile and lush. Psalm 23 says that the Lord / the Shepherd-King of Israel provides for His people; He doesn't ever let them wander off where there's not enough.

The psalm goes on to say that the Lord leads His people beside the "still waters," and the sense there is that they have rest as they dwell in the presence of their shepherd ("still waters"=="waters of rest"). The Shepherd also restores life ("soul") as He "leads in paths of righteousness

for His Name's sake." And there are a couple of interesting things to take note of there: 1) "paths of righteousness" is to be understood as tracks, like following the tracks or ruts of a tractor through overgrown brush on a farm. Since "righteousness" is often understood in the O.T. as God's faithfulness to His people, the sense is that God leads His people along the way to salvation, and they follow in His path, regardless of whatever obstacles block their way. 2) God does this "for His Name's sake," which is to say that it's not because of anything about them, but because of Who He is and how He wants to be known that the Lord leads His people in righteousness. We're saved by grace, St. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, and the care of Israel's Shepherd-King reflects that when Psalm 23 says that it's "for His Name's sake" that He leads His sheep in "paths of righteousness."

That's important to know, because the next portion of Psalm 23 speaks of being protected while walking through "the valley of the shadow of death." Folks, if you're gonna make that walk (and we all do), you need to know that the One leading you is a reliable Guide. Psalm 23 says that's what you have with the Lord as your Shepherd; the rod and staff of His presence comfort you even in the midst of evil.

Here again we see the Lord as Shepherd protecting His sheep, since the rod would've been what a shepherd 'of old' used to keep wild animals away from his sheep. The Shepherd King of Israel keeps the wild animals of evil AND EVEN DEATH away from His sheep. The psalm speaks of the sheep of God's people resting in His presence, and that is significant because it was a curse in the O.T. to be left alone. Isaiah 53 even says that "all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way" (v.6) - i.e., they've wandered off by themselves, and that's NOT a good thing, Isaiah says. Since the staff would've been what a shepherd 'of old' used to gather his sheep together, Psalm 23 says that the Lord/ Israel's Shepherd-King gathers His sheep to Himself, protecting and providing for them as His people.

Which leads us on in the psalm to the imagery of a table being prepared and a cup overflowing, images that echo what was said at the beginning, in terms of the green pastures: Israel's Shepherd-King nourishes His sheep to the full. He also bestows upon them favor and honor, which is what anointing the head with oil brings to mind. And then comes the end of the psalm, which is my favorite part, where David speaks of the goodness and mercy of the Lord following him all the days of his life ...

That's my favorite part of the psalm because, in the original language, the sense is that of the Shepherd chasing after His sheep eagerly - so:

"Surely goodness and mercy chases after me all the days of my life
... "(v.6)

This provides a type of symmetrical closure to the psalm, because at the psalm's beginning we were told that the Lord *leads* us beside the still waters, and here we're told that His goodness and mercy *follows* us from behind. To be a sheep of Israel's Shepherd-King is to have a rear-guard as well as one in the front, both seeing to it that we dwell in the Lord's presence - "the house of the Lord" - forever. To dwell in the presence of the Lord is to be protected! and provided for to the full, and that is the message of Psalm 23.

With that we've made it through the Shepherd Psalm, and I think we can all agree that to have the Lord/ the Shepherd-King of Israel as one's Shepherd is to be protected and provided for to the full. All of us here today are sheep in the fold of Israel - we're the NEW Israel, having been made God's people through faith in His Son, the Good Shepherd-King of all: the Lord Jesus Christ. Today's O.T. Lesson tells us that God Himself would shepherd His people:

"I Myself will search for My sheep and will seek them out, ...
"(Ezekiel 34: 11)

And in today's Gospel Jesus says:

"I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life
for the sheep."(John 10: 11)

Jesus laid down His life for us to protect us from all evil, and He is risen again from the dead that we might dwell forever in His sleepen.

The kings of this world often use their power to look out for their own interests; they're not shepherds looking to care for their sheep, but hired hands looking out for themselves. As in Israel's day (see David ls later sin with Bathsheba) so too in ours, the powers that be often use their power to cover their own skin. What today's Gospel (John 10) and Psalm (23) tell us is that God did NOT do that, but instead exposed the skin of His Son to scourging and nails to care for us, caring so much that He died on a cross to pay for our sins. He didn't stay dead either, but came back to life again on Easter that we might live forever with Him, as John goes on to write that Jesus said:

" ... I lay down My life, that I may take it up again. No one takes it
from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have power to lay
it down, and I have power to take it up again; ... "(John 10: 17b-18a)

That finally is what it means to have Jesus as our Shepherd-King. It means we have a Shepherd, and a King, Who has died and lived to tell about it, and because of that is able to lead us safely through the "valley of the shadow of death" to eternal life in the house of the Lord. We trust Jesus to do that because He first laid down His life for us. We trust Jesus to do that because He took His life up again. We trust Jesus because, with Him as our Good Shepherd, we are protected and provided for forever -

- in His ✠ Name,

Amen!