

"Shepherded by the Lord"

Psalm 23

May 7, 2017

4th Sunday of Easter

We all want our needs to be met. In fact, we seem to talk more about our needs and having them met than most previous generations. We have a variety of needs: physical needs, spiritual needs, life and death needs, and so on. These needs raise two important questions. First, WHO will meet our needs? And, second, HOW will our needs be met?

As far as WHO will meet our needs, I think most of us would like to be self-reliant. We depend upon ourselves to meet our own needs. We like it that way because it gives us a certain sense of freedom. We are free from dependence on others. There is (or, at least, there used to be) pride taken in that. To be dependent and have to rely on someone else to meet your needs was embarrassing. People wanted to be independent and free from reliance on anyone or anything.

Many, especially today, take that self-reliance and independence a step further. People want to be independent from God. For unbelievers, this means having nothing at all to do with God. For believers, it means having nothing to do with God until we need Him for something. Until that time, we are very self-reliant and independent.

This attitude self-reliance entered into the world along with sin. Remember how Adam and Eve were right after God first made them? They were completely dependent upon God. AND they were perfectly content under God's care. Why did this good situation change? It wasn't because God got stingy with His care and blessings. It was because Adam and Eve decided they wanted to be independent from God. The devil's temptation was not mainly about disobeying God's regulations on what they could or could not eat. His temptation was that they could be like God. They would no longer have to rely on Him to meet their needs. They could rely on themselves. And that's what defines sin: being separated from God and on your own.

How has that worked out for humanity? Sin has brought need and death into this world, neither of which existed in Eden. We try our best to rely on ourselves and meet our own needs. That often doesn't go well as our needs often surpass our resources. Even when we successfully meet some of our needs, it is really God who is meeting those needs for us. (More about that later.) And, try as we might, we can't meet the greatest need: the need to live and not die.

Being independent and relying only on ourselves ultimately fails us. We need help. What do we need? A life coach to help us make better decisions? A CEO to manage our resources? A personal manager to more efficiently meet our needs? No. The Bible says we need a shepherd. A shepherd? Why a shepherd? Because we are like sheep. Ah, that must mean we are warm, cuddly, humble, and obedient creatures. Umm..not exactly. The Bible says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way." (Is. 53:6) Not only do we not meet our own needs, but we squander away that which we do have. Who can get us out of this mess?

David, the shepherd turned king, declares in our text, "The LORD is my shepherd." On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we think of the Lord Jesus being our shepherd. We picture Him as a man holding a lamb in His arms which is cute and comforting. This picture is accurate but the whole thing is bigger than that. David is using the divine name here: Yahweh. Yahweh, the Almighty God and Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe deigns to be my shepherd, the One who cares for me and supplies my needs.

How does He does this? David goes on to explain. "I shall not want." A friend of mine, when he was a child, thought that "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want;" meant "The Lord is my Shepherd and I don't want him." A better way of understanding the phrase, "I shall not want" is "I shall not be in want. I shall not lack anything."

In terms of our physical needs, we will not be lacking. "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." As a shepherd feeds his sheep with the lush green grass that grows up after a refreshing rain and gives them to drink from the still pure waters of a brook, so the Lord will richly provide us with food, drink, and all other things for this

body and life which come under the category of “daily bread” which Jesus commanded us to pray for and which He has promised to give. The Lord will restore our souls (more accurately, “our lives”) from a state of need to a state of contentment, both by providing for our physical needs and by working in us an attitude of contentment for His provision.

The Lord also cares for our spiritual needs. There is nothing more important for a sheep than to follow its shepherd. To stray from the shepherd’s path is to invite danger and death. Lack of food, dangerous cliffs, and the ever-threatening hungry wolf wait for the sheep out side of the safety of the path. So, the shepherd leads the sheep along the right path where they will be safe.

The Lord, our shepherd, “leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” He establishes His Commandments wherein we are to walk AND He leads us in those Commandments, teaching and empowering us to obey them. When we stray from the paths of righteousness through our sin and disobedience, He stops our straying by working repentance in our hearts and He puts us back on the path through the Absolution which conveys His forgiveness won by Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself upon the cross.

The Lord also meets our most important need: victory over death. When a sheep must go through a very shadowy valley, filled with darkness and danger, the natural reaction would be one of fear. Yet the sheep fears nothing as long as the shepherd walks through the valley with it. The shepherd carries a rod to fight off any enemy which seeks to kill the sheep in the valley. He also has his staff to lead the sheep safely through the valley on the other side.

While the Lord does not guide us into death – it is never His intention that we should die, the path into the darkness of death is one which we all must walk because of our sin. As much as we try to ignore, deny, or sanitize death, the prospect of facing death terrifies us. The psalmist expresses the calm and confidence we all share because of our Good Shepherd when he says, “Even 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.”

We don’t fear death, not because death is not frightening or because we won’t have to experience it. We don’t fear death because we don’t face it alone. Our Good Shepherd is with us every step of the way. In fact, He has opened the way through death to eternal life by experiencing death on the cross for the sake of our sins and overcoming death and rising to life again. He fights off sin, death, and Satan by the rod of His Law. He guides us through death to eternal life by the staff of His Gospel.’

When we pass through the valley of the shadow of death to glorious Mount Zion and eternal life, there all our needs will be perfectly and eternally met for us in every conceivable way. David writes, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” We will be guests in our Father’s house at a banquet where we will be finally free from all enemies – from sin, from the world, from death and hell, and from Satan himself. Our wounds will be anointed with the oil of healing and in perfect health will we spend eternity. The cup of blessing will overflow for us forever.

As sheep in the Good Shepherd’s fold, we have everything we need now on earth and will have everything we desire then in heaven. David summarizes it beautifully at the end of His psalm: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” How could it be any better? While we live here, we will experience our Good Shepherd’s goodness and mercy – blessing and forgiveness. And after we go through the valley of the shadow of death and through to the other side, we will dwell with our Good Shepherd in the house of the Lord forever.

What more could we need than that? Nothing! What more could we desire than that? Nothing! What more is there to be said about our Good Shepherd than that? Nothing – except Amen – “yes, yes, it shall be so.”