

## **1. The Lord is My Shepherd**

Of all the stupid and ridiculous images. I mean, do I look like I need a shepherd? What I need is someone who knows how to cut my hair. What I need is an honest but clever tax accountant. What I need is an even more honest and savvy auto mechanic. What I need is an available, compassionate primary care physician, a gentle, talented dentist, an experienced, top-tier podiatrist, a brilliant therapist, a non-judgmental preacher and a genius lawyer in case I ever need one. I need a team of professionals to keep me glued together. This “A” list team needs to be supported by landscapers, painters, air conditioning repair people and upholstery cleaners and window cleaners. Would you like me to go on? Would YOU like to go on? I bet between us we could come up with a list of about two hundred people whose job it is to keep our aging bodies—no matter what your age your body is aging—and residences glued together. I mean wouldn't any of them be a better metaphor? The Lord is my primary care physician. I shall not get sick. The Lord is my football coach. I shall not fumble. The Lord is my tax accountant. I shall not get audited. The Lord is my lawyer. I will stay out of jail. But the Lord is my shepherd?

And yet the Bible is all about shepherds. Moses is on a hillside shepherding when God calls his name. Little David starts his auspicious career as a shepherd. Isaiah says: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom...” Ezekiel writes: “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.” Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, and Paul calls him the great shepherd of the sheep.” So I guess there must be something to this shepherd theme.

And yet I live in a city where a lot of us have never even seen a real live sheep and almost all of us have never seen a real live shepherd. So what do we mean when we say: The Lord is my Shepherd? And how can we rethink it and rewrite it so that it means something real to those who desperately need this loving care?

## **2. I Shall Not Want**

Now that is a good one. It just goes to show you how we can say this Bible stuff and not really think about what we are saying or mean what we are saying. I shall not want? You shall not want? Ha! I mean I want stuff all day every day. I want breakfast when I wake up. I want the newspaper delivered to my door—dry and on time. I want a new refrigerator that makes ice. Sometimes I want a McDonald's hot fudge sundae. I have grown up in a world that has driven want into me, and I, like almost everyone I know, am driven by it. Beyond the endless list of material things I want I want to experience transformative drama and read life changing literature and hear music that transports me and movies that move me to tears... I want to see the Louvre, but I don't want to fly. I want all kinds of things for those I love, especially my grandchildren. I deeply, deeply repent the world that is their legacy, and I want to change it. Now. I want healing for the sick and comfort for the grieving and renewal for the bay and an end to the insanity in North Korea and Syria and Baltimore and an end to violence and meanness on every street corner and on every talk show down the street and around the globe. I mean I want and I want and I want. Let me give you just a minute to think about what you want. (Pause.)

And yet when I repeat this psalm which I do so often I say: I shall not want. On the deepest of all possible human levels, I shall not want. I shall not, I will not have that gnawing, that nagging, that dis-ease which says: you are not ok until you have this thing. The psalmist is drawing a direct, undeniable, absolute connection between the first and second thoughts. You can write it as a clause. Because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. You can use a semicolon. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. However you write it, it is one total and complete and inextricably linked thought, and it challenges the way I really live. I can read it. I can teach it. I can sing it. I can preach it. But do I live it? The Lord God Almighty, maker and ruler of heaven and earth, cares about me. Which brings me to number 3.

### **3. I/My**

Although I do not necessarily get shepherd, I do get I/My! Interesting how personal, intimate and me centered this psalm is. Maybe that is why it has always been loved. Most of us are extremely self-centered—not me, of course. But most of us like to think of life starring me, so the idea of my shepherd is appealing.

Come to think of it, it is so much easier than our father or our daily bread. When we pray that prayer we have to share the father and the bread. But, upon deeper reflection, even with this psalm those bothersome thoughts creep in. Is it possible for me to really not want, to really be ok, to keep the Lord to myself, if others are wanting?

**4. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.**

The trouble with this is that those green pastures are getting harder and harder to find. They have sprouted McManisons like giant toadstools after the rain. But actually I can relate to this one because I have a deck and a yard and Sherry's pool and a terrific bathtub with water jets and the big bed and most of all a family and friends who I love and who love me I understand these things. And because I have experienced the green mountains in Vermont and the glacial beauty of Keuka Lake and Sandee Road on a spring day I can understand these things. And because of this Gathering and the breathtaking blessing that is Sabbath I can understand these things.

And because these are things I can picture, things that are real to me, things that really comfort me and care for me and re-energize me I can understand this.

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

If there are right paths I guess there must be wrong paths. Could it be that this is why my soul is cared for, nurtured, renewed, made authentic, connected to the Source of Life? Could it be that when I do what I am supposed to do and go where I am supposed to go it is because my Lord is leading me? Could it be that if I meditate on the metaphor, that if I go deeper into it, I realize that it defines the relationship that I am supposed to have with my God? If this could be, then I am beginning to get it. Could it be that others know to follow because others see God in us?

## **6. Even though I walk through the darkest valley**

OK. Even those who have never seen a shepherd or a sheep or a barn or a pasture can get this because everyone has dark nights of the soul. Where do we begin? “When you see children dying, when you see innocent people suffering, and when you see young parents stricken with an illness, how can you believe in a God of love and compassion unless you are prepared to say, ‘Some things happen in the world that God does not want to happen.’”  
(Rabbi Kushner)

Even those who have never seen a shepherd sure as heck have seen—have lived through—a dark night, have walked through a dark valley. When you hear the words: I am leaving you—or when you say them, when the one you love the most dies, when you feel that the pain and agony of those you know and those blown over by apathy and neglect and blown away by abuse and blown up by war it is dark, dark, dark. And you have lived it. And I have lived it. But even though we have lived it....

## **7. I fear no evil, for you are with me**

Hear the words of Rabbi Kushner, well-known author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*:

“The psalmist is not saying, ‘I will fear no evil because evil only happens to people who deserve it.’ He is saying, ‘This is a scary, out-of-control world, but it doesn’t scare me, because I know that God is on my side, not on the side of the hijacker. God is on my side, not on the side of the illness, or the accident, or the terrible thing that happened. And that’s enough to give me the confidence.’ The twenty-third Psalm is the answer to the question,

‘How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?’<sup>1</sup>

“Have you ever been really scared? Maybe it took a disease to scare you, a notice that your job had been eliminated, a phone call from the police late at night, or a letter on a kitchen counter that said, ‘I’m not coming back.’ We speak sometimes of being scared stiff or paralyzed with fear, but as a pastor I’ve seen that most people react to fear by running like crazy. It doesn’t matter where they run or what they try next. They just have to keep moving. The late psychologist Rollo May wrote: ‘Humans are the strangest of all God’s creatures because they run fastest when they have lost their way.’<sup>2</sup> And for that reason...

## **8. Your rod and your staff they comfort me**

“Jesus said, ‘I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep.’ This Good Shepherd’s rod and staff comfort the sheep. The rod is thrown out on a path to startle the sheep warning them that they are in danger of wandering into an unsafe place. The shepherd uses the rod to drive off coyotes and wolves. Being stubborn creatures the sheep often get themselves into ridiculous dilemmas...’<sup>3</sup> And I try to translate this into the scary moments of my life. You should too. What are your coyotes? Where are your wolves? And what does God’s rod look like today?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pbs.org.wnet/religionandethics/week813/p-feature.html>

<sup>2</sup> Craig Barnes.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/sehested\\_3831.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/sehested_3831.htm)

## **9. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;**

Although these words are from Hebrew Scripture I hear them through the ears of my Christianity. For me this table is communion. Some call it Eucharist. Some call it the Lord's Supper. I call it communion. And that is the thin place, the place of grace, the place where God and I come together. There is great power in what we do here. There is great comfort in what we do here. There is a great meeting needs and filling wants in what we do here. It is Almighty God who has prepared this table. Not you. Not me. God created wheat. God created grapes. God gave us the ability to take these things and to transform them. He prepares this safe and saving place for me—for you—for you and me. And the point is that it is not in the absence of my enemies; it is in the presence of those who lack goodness. God's peace and God's presence do not mean that there are no others who do not want to harm us. God's presence means that we commune—we create an alternative reality; we touch God—while all of that craziness threatens us. When we break bread together our souls feast in the midst of soul famine.

Of this theologian Kosuke Koyama writes:

“People enjoying such a feast would make themselves an easy target for their adversaries! Yet this is none other than an expression of the supreme wisdom and strength of God, whose foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and whose weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Corinthians 1:25). God's vulnerability is stronger than human invulnerability. Through a banquet table—not guns and warplanes—God wills to transform us and our world... We are filled with wonder and awe when we encounter such a power.

The table that God prepares for us culminates in the Eucharistic table of the Lord. This sacrament is the ultimate symbol of God's hospitality, demonstrated in full view of the enemy.

Jesus ‘loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end’ (John 13:1). He did so knowing that the time of his martyrdom was near. The table was prepared by the very life of God.”<sup>4</sup>

### **10. You anointed my head with oil** **My cup overflows**

In other words you care for me; you abundantly bless me. But before we end this let me go back to the sheep thing. “I don’t mind calling the Lord my Shepherd, but I’ve never been to flattered by being called one of his sheep. I had hoped to be the eagle of the Lord, or maybe the cunning tiger. Sheep aren’t particularly smart. They scare easily, and have a knack for getting lost. Most of us don’t look lost. We haven’t fallen through society’s cracks into homelessness and poverty. But the psalmist would say, ‘Oh no. It is you who have lost your way in a relationship that’s offered more hurt than love, in a job that leaves you depleted and spent, or in the guilt of not being good enough, pretty enough or smart enough for someone whose judgment cuts deep.’

Some of us have gotten lost in our battles against declining health. Others are lost in grief. And how many of us are jut simply lost in our shame for things done and left undone trying so hard to find ourselves we’ve even lost sight of who we are, who we were created to be. The reason both the psalmist and Jesus spent so much time describing us as lost was not to judge us but to help us find our salvation.”<sup>5</sup>

The key to understanding this whole psalm, even if we have never seen a shepherd, is understanding in our minds and hearts and lives and souls that “thou art with me.”

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=838>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2249>



**11. 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.**

All of this depends on believing the first line, on understanding the first line, on living the first line. All of this depends on something happening inside of you that does not allow those words to just be words, that does not allow that image to stay old.

These words are not just about our endless, whiny wants. When we say The Lord is the one who loves me, tends me, cares for me, and I am his, we are saying that our deepest wants and needs are met. The thing that we long for, the thing that makes us not ok, the thing that troubles us, the thing that drives us to the shrink and drives us to drink, the thing that prevents us from being a force for change, the thing we always blame, the thing we always fear, the thing that hurts us even when all other hurts are healed, the thing that convinces us we are alone, the thing that stops us from being saved and the thing that stops us from saving others: this is cured, healed, fixed. Do you remember the way you felt the safest, the surest, the most curled-up, the most cared for moment in your life? It is that moment, but it is that moment for eternity. You are the one for whom the Lord searches. You are the one the Lord finds. You are the one the Lord gently drapes over his shoulders. You are the one the Lord comforts. You are the one the Lord carries home. You are the one that the Lord—the Lord!—holds in his very arms. And it is then, and only then, that you know at the core of your being—by way of old metaphor or new—that you shall never, ever want.

Amen, Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering Of Baltimore, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

