

Be Careful What You Pray For

Leigh Stuckey

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina

You can't preach a series on the Psalms without its most ubiquitous, most quoted, most beloved psalm—the 23rd. Listen with fresh ears this morning. Our translation comes from Hebrew scholar Robert Alter and is deeply faithful to the original Hebrew:

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
In grass meadows He makes me lie down,
by quiet waters guides me.
My life He brings back.
He leads me on pathways of justice
for His name's sake.
Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow,
I fear no harm,
for You are with me.
Your rod and Your staff—
it is they that console me.
You set out a table before me
in the face of my foes.
You moisten my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
Let but goodness and kindness pursue me
all the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for many long days.¹

Children's songs have a way of quickly becoming earworms. You hear the first three bars and suddenly it is rattling in your brain for days. There's a particular song I've heard around Westminster's halls that gets me every time: "I just want to be a sheep." That's both the title and all the words, or at least all I care to remember: "I just want to be a sheep—baa baa baa baa— just want to be a sheep."

I'd forgotten about "I just want to be a sheep" until February when the world was introduced to Baa-rack, a wool matted sheep who'd been wandering the Australian bush for years—barely surviving under 77 pounds of wool, so thick it obscured his vision, so heavy it affected his ability to walk. Baarack, who had been fighting for food and water, was malnourished. His poor health was hidden by all that wool—matted, bulbous, and dirty, more like a camel than a sheep.²

Baarack was spotted by a property maintenance man when he just happened to wander in from the wild. From there he became a sensation. And he got me wondering, do I want to be a sheep?

Psalms 23 is one of the best known pieces of biblical literature in American culture. Not only among folks like us, folks who go to church week in and week out, but out

in the wider world. Tupac riffed on it, so did Kanye and Coolio. As the ship sinks in James Cameron's *Titanic*, the chaplain calls down the comfort of the shepherd. In Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*, a girl quotes the Psalm over her dog's grave—asking after God in a time of deep sadness. President Bush quoted it during the darkest hours of September 11, 2001. The Grateful Dead riffed on it, and Pink Floyd too. We sing it week after week in worship: "Shepherd Me O God," "You Lord are Both Lamb and Shepherd," "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need." Over and over we appeal to God our shepherd.

But I'm still not sure about being a sheep. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to lie down in grassy meadows. Heck, I'm glad to lie down just about anywhere. Being led alongside a stream, hearing the water trickle between pebbles ... the Psalm doesn't say I get a gin and tonic, but I imagine My Shepherd Would Supply That Need too. It sounds blissful, rosy even. I'll be the Lord's sheep if that's our itinerary.

Reading this text today, my mind isn't far from battered down Baarak. If I'm meant to be a sheep, what exactly does it mean to be shepherded? Where is the Great Shepherd leading?

The Psalm sings of green grass and long days dwelling in God's house. The images linger in our imagination. But the shepherd's route to the Lord's house seems counterintuitive, threatening even. Beside the road sits death, right there, along our ambling graze; led by our great shepherd, dark shadows stand ready to enfold us. At the table where the shepherd feeds us, so too sit our enemies. The Lord is our shepherd, so we, sheep, follow. But if God is indeed a *good* shepherd, why do we so often find ourselves in vales and valleys? What good shepherd leads us to the edge of our lives?

A simple reading of Psalm 23 may approach the shadowed valley as if it is just a hop and a skip to the grassy meadow. That's how, I believe, we most often read the text. But life teaches us differently. A faithful reading of the 23rd Psalm considers—dwells in—the vales at its center. It asks us to faithfully follow the shepherd, to trust in God's guiding staff, even as it leads us right up to the vale of death's shadow.

In abstraction, such considerations are a tall task—especially if we find ourselves reading this Psalm on the greener side of the meadow. What good is dwelling on shadows? Keep on the sunny side, I say! But then again, closing our ears to the cries of suffering around us will not protect us for long, and being a sheep means not only being led, but being among our flock, hearing, as it were, their warning cries.

A vale stands at the center of Psalm 23. The shepherd leads us there. To counter our instincts to brush it aside, I suggest we turn to another Psalm to en flesh its lament. Listen once more for the word of God in the 22nd Psalm (NRSV):

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?

²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

⁶But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people....

¹¹ Do not be far from me,
 for trouble is near
 and there is no one to help.
¹² Many bulls encircle me,
 strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
¹³ they open wide their mouths at me,
 like a ravening and roaring lion.
¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
 and all my bones are out of joint;
 my heart is like wax;
 it is melted within my breast;
¹⁵ my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
 and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
 you lay me in the dust of death.

“You lay me,” cries the Psalmist, “in the dust of death.” Sit with the contradiction. The very same Psalmist whose poetry confidently soars with praise in 23 accuses God of being far away, of having abandoned post in 22. The Psalmist fears that God has left standing instead wild animals, mocking neighbors, and an abyss of pain.

Still, in the depths of sorrows, in the darkest vale, the Psalmist calls on God. The Psalmist’s faithfulness is not contingent on many long days of goodness. It is grounded in a trust that the Psalmist is led, yoked—by rod and staff—to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, even when death closes in.

It may be an editorial accident, Psalm 23 following the cry of Psalm 22,³ but I think they stand in unique relationship. Lest we get too rosy imagining our relationship with God is all streams and meadows, Psalm 22 calls us to give flesh to its vales and valleys; it gives language to express the fear and longing of our darkest shadows. It provides a model for faithfulness in experiences of forsakenness.

“Where are you” asks the Psalmist? More even than “why,” “where” is the cry of the forsaken. It is the cry of Jesus on the cross when he quotes this very text. It is the cry of suffering today, and it links us to the very heart of God. Does the Great Shepherd abandon the flock in the depths of the valley?

By the middle of March 2021, over 500,000 Americans had been killed by Covid-19. It was then 52 weeks since we had gathered in person without restrictions. We have seen the toll of shadow and death. What we thought would be a short walk through a foreign valley—two weeks, just two weeks—has been a prolonged experience of fear and alienation.

“Why” is not the question of this pandemic. Where it has been attempted to be answered, it has fallen to racist tropes, problematic assertions, conspiracy, and unhelpful guesswork. What I have heard as a Pastor of this church time and again is “Where?” Where is God when a beloved family member dies alone? Where is God when we are forced to be apart? Where is God when jobs are lost, when families rage against one another in the midst of bitter political opposition, when another black man is killed for going on a jog or just being at the wrong place at the wrong time?

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If you know Psalm 22, you likely know it on Jesus’ lips. After betrayal, trials, and beatings, after the shame of a crown of thorns and the long walk to Golgatha, in the midst of being tortured, Jesus

cries out to the Father using the first phrase of Psalm 22.

Jesus died faithfully experiencing the Father's far-awayness, experiencing the vale of death's shadow. In that moment, with that cry, the nearness of the valley pressing in the space where he once so fully felt the presence of the Father, Jesus, himself fully God, takes into the very heart of divinity the all too common reality of human suffering. It is his fullest identification with us, the moment on the cross when he absorbs the depths of forsakenness, of grief, of aloneness, into God's being, God's essence. Where is God in our suffering? Does God abandon post? Never.

When we watch Jesus' long walk to Golgotha, when we hear the cry of Jesus on the cross, when we behold his empty tomb, we see the power of the good shepherd who lays down his life for his flock, who leads us through grassy meadows, who goes ahead and suffers with us, who knows well the vale of our shadows and leads us through them. When we hear his cry, we hear the cries of our siblings here and across the globe who suffer injustice, who are alienated, mocked, set aside, and whose bodies betray them. And we know that God is near.

Christian discipleship—being a sheep, as it were—is not a means of avoiding difficult paths, it is not unending prosperity or blissful ignorance, it is not greener meadows. It is following Jesus on the way. There may be weddings and wine on that path, but there will be craggy stretches too. Suffering, even—ours and the world's. Psalm 22 teaches us faith's suffering well.

But Psalm 23 reminds us that even then—especially then—God our shepherd, the Son who experienced death on the cross, the Father who experienced the death of the Son, the Spirit who bound the two in mystical agony will Shepherd us on. God goes ahead. And for those of us on this side of the Kingdom, that is good news indeed.

In Psalm 22, verses 20 and 21a, the Psalmist continues his cry for delivery. He is surrounded by wild dogs and cries out to be saved from the "mouth of the lion." But then there's a pause. Something happens. Right there in verse 21 is a sudden change, "you have rescued me."

²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

Jesus died before he could quote these verses. The agony of Friday stretched into the void of Saturday, but then came Sunday. There's a pause, a space, and there's the risen Lord bearing the wounds of the way, shepherding us beyond vales and valleys and into the house of the Lord for many long days.

Don't get me wrong, Friday is not simply negated by Sunday. The pain of the shadow does not disappear in the meadow. But our suffering is enfolded into the heart of a God who bears it and redeems it, who leads us and redeems us.

Psalm 22 and 23 are of one piece, a brief on life this side of the Kingdom. One is not complete without the other. And they both call us to act more like sheep. We who pride ourselves on our rugged individualism, our wit and wisdom, we who fool ourselves with myths of self-made men and absolute freedom. If God is truly our shepherd, then we are truly sheep. We need leading. And we need our flock. Otherwise, in vale, valley, and meadow, we are lost.

Poor Baarack. I wonder what happened to him. Was he spooked? Did he flee? Was there a green-grass meadow where the food was plentiful that he thought looked better than the field ahead? One way or another he found himself separated. And the weight of his wool, the encircling darkness around his eyes nearly did him in. Until, that is, he found his way back to the flock, and his life was restored.

If we are going to be sheep, we need to accept some shepherding. We need not run to grassier meadows or strike out on our own. We stand, as did the Psalmist, in the midst of the congregation, bearing the scars of our suffering and proclaiming God's redemptive salvation.

What do the Psalms teach us? Trust God's leading and stick together, through vales and in meadows. Rejoice with one another, and bear one another's forsakenness. The table is set. The house is full, the flock is returned to its whole.

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.

²⁹ To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.

³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,

³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

And the Lord will be our shepherd, and we God's sheep.

Notes

1 Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 78-80.

2 Nur-Azna Sanusi, "Baarack from the brink: Wild sheep rescued in Australia shorn of 35kg fleece," *Reuters*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-sheep/baarack-from-the-brink-wild-sheep-rescued-in-australia-shorn-of-35-kg-fleece-idUSKBN2AO0CW>.

3. Walter Brueggemann, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid: Introducing the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 100-105.

I am indebted to J. Moltmann's work in *The Crucified God* and *Jesus Christ for Today's World* for his consideration of the Trinity's participation in the moment of Jesus' death, a theology that permeates my understanding of divinity and influences deeply Lenten and Easter proclamation.