

As Our Shepherd, the Lord Meets Our Needs, Guides Us, Is with Us in Trouble, and Is Our Gracious Host



As we will hear on Sunday, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Pictured above is the high altar at the Church of Sts. Peter & Paul (Roman Catholic) in San Francisco. The dome painting shows Christ holding an open book with those words of Jesus. The marble high altar weighs 40 tons. See it at www.stspeterpaul-san-francisco.ca.us.

"Our Psalm for today, Psalm 23, is one of the most known and loved passages in all the Bible," the Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander said Sunday, "and for good reason: it testifies to God's loving, gracious care in our lives."

"Psalm 23 was known as a 'pilgrimage song,'" he continued, "because it was sung by pilgrims whose physical journey mirrored the spiritual journey of life. That journey is one where persons wander through both the lush times and the arid times of life, searching for the presence of God in each. What we find along this journey is God's constant presence with us. The biblical writers employed the metaphor of the shepherd to communicate this reality. Using Psalm 23, I'd like to explore four insights into the metaphor of the Lord as Shepherd."

1. *As our Shepherd, God provides our needs* (vv. 1-2).

"Shepherds in the Middle East often used the expression, 'to set the table,' when referring to preparing the fields for grazing." The shepherd would uproot poisonous weeds and thorns, rid the area of enemies of the sheep such as snakes and scorpion nests, and separate and treat injured or sickly sheep. "What God provides is astonishing," Pastor Thelander said, because "green pastures were almost non-existent," and "still waters were rarely seen. The dark valleys were often surrounded by craggy rocks, the perfect playground for thieves and robbers." As "the loving Shepherd of your life," however, "God provides for your needs. You shall not be in want. He is faithful, and you have found him faithful again and again."

2. *As our Shepherd, God guides us* (vv. 2-4).

When we take "the wrong road in life," or go in "a dangerous and destructive direction," or make the best choice we can but "things don't turn out very well," "in such times there is always the possibility of being restored to the right path. There is no such thing as a 'dead end' road. All that is required is that we carve out time and space in our lives to listen for the voice of our Shepherd. . . . When you think about it, our real challenge in this life is very simple. It is found in the words of our collect for today. The secret of life consists in hearing Jesus' voice when he calls us by name, and following where he heads."

3. *As our Shepherd, God stands with us in times of need* (vv. 4-5).

"The phrase, 'though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,' is an inaccurate translation of the original Hebrew. In the Hebrew, the valley is not a valley of the (p. 2→)

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Sundays
 10:00 a.m.: Word & Table service
 11:30 a.m.: Refreshments, conversation
 11:45 a.m.: Post-service discussion
 6:00 p.m.: (First Sundays only) Evensong, then tea & refreshments

Readings, 4/20: Acts 17:1-15; Ps. 66:1-11; 1 Peter 2:1-9; John 14:1-14.

4/27: Acts 17:22-31; Ps. 148:7-14; 1 Peter 3:8-18; John 15:1-8.

Prayer Emphases: New Zealand; Orthodox Presbyterian Church; Southern Hills United Methodist Church, Lexington, KY, and the Rev. Dr. Bill Moore; missionaries: parishioners on Hartman Street.

(Sermon, cont'd.) shadow of death, but is properly rendered, 'valley of deep darkness', a place of fear and danger but not limited to death. "Each of us (is in) this valley of darkness at some stage of life. . . . God does not always take away the dark cannons pointing at our lives, but instead stands with us in our troubles, placing his dependable arms around our shoulders."

4. *As our Shepherd, God is our gracious host* (vv. 5-6). "The prepared table, the anointed head, overflowing cup, special blessing of God's house remind us of God's gracious hospitality to us. The reference here to preparing a table" is to when the children of Israel angrily asked Moses, "Can God set a table in the wilderness?" Though pursued by enemies, the psalmist "is pursued and overtaken by the goodness and mercy of God. There is a place for him in God's house, at God's table. . . . All of this truth from Psalm 23 finds its complete expression in . . . Jesus Christ," "the Great Shepherd" and "our host."