

Start with Song – “The Lord’s My Shepherd” -Stuart Townend  
<https://youtu.be/pN4tPkX0MGO>

my favorite version and how it often plays through my head.

I often shy away from Psalm 23 because it resonates with so many people...it almost feels like preaching on it might diminish some of its sacredness. I decided to preach on it today because of what it suggests about life in God. In 6 verses, we learn something essential about God’s *sustenance, safety, and surplus*. In a time when lines are growing at food banks, the value of all human lives is faltering, and intimacy is as fleeting as a “like” on social media, Psalm 23 is more relevant than ever.

Psalm 23 begins this way: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

What does the psalmist, mean by “shepherd”? When we hear “shepherd,” we usually think of someone who cares for the sheep, and that is true. But in ancient Israel, “shepherd” also meant “king.” The king of Israel was the shepherd of the people - the one who provided the necessities of life. So in the first verse, the psalmist is really saying, “The *LORD* is my king,” not some imperfect human being.

In verse 2, the psalmist tells us more about this divine shepherd-king: “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters....” We often think of places of retreat and rest when we hear this verse. However, this verse meant something different for the people of ancient Israel who had to cope with famine and drought. “Green pastures” meant abundant harvest and “still waters” meant something good to drink. It’s fine if this verse symbolizes spiritual nourishment for us, but it also points to actual nourishment - basic sustenance.

Verse 3 puts an exclamation point on the previous verse: “He restores my soul.” We’re not just talking about a refreshing spa treatment here; we’re talking about the difference between life and death. Bad kings ignore the needs of the people; good kings ensure that the needs of the people are met, both physically and spiritually. God is a good and trustworthy king.

Verse 3 continues: “He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” I didn’t grow up in a typical NL outpost. My family home was predominantly a farming community. And I remember the sheep being driven to the pasture (it would shut down the only road!) If one sheep ran off into the ditch or onto someone’s yard,

a shepherd and most likely a trusty dog would go in pursuit, making sure that the sheep got reunited with the flock. In the same way, the Holy One makes sure that we are on a safe and trustworthy path through the gift faith and the witness of others.

In verse 4, things change. Up to this point, we have focused on God's sustenance/nourishment. But we also need God's safety. The psalmist acknowledges times of difficulty: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me." The darkest valley may refer to times of temptation, confusion, loneliness, loss, even death. The Psalmist makes it clear that even in the darkest places, we need not fear the wild things, because the shepherd will protect us with his rod and his staff - signs not only of discipline and protection, but also royal authority. The rod and the scepter are interchangeable.

Something else happens in verse 4. While Psalm 23 begins in the third person, with the psalmist and the Lord at some distance from each other, in verse 4, the psalmist refers to the Lord in the second person. "He" become "you." The relationship deepens as the psalmist relies on God in the darkest valley.

In verse 5, the psalmist continues: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." Here the shepherd imagery transforms into God as gracious host. This host not only provides sustenance and safety; this host provides surplus - good things to overflowing abundance.

The last verse of Psalm 23 begins this way: "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." The abundance in the previous verse continues here, only this time the surplus is not just in terms of food and drink, but also in terms of God's *hesed*, or loving kindness. God pours out God's goodness and mercy upon all creation. God will never let us go.

The psalm ends this way: "...I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long." This verse is important. The house of the Lord refers to the temple, but it also refers to the whole community of God. While the rest of Psalm 23 is deeply personal, this verse puts our individual experience in the context of the larger community. Relationship with God is not some private event, sealed off from the

larger body. Intimacy with God always leads us to others, with whom we can share God's sustenance, safety and surplus.

So, this all leads me to the question of "What about today? What does Psalm 23 offer our current situation?"

A worldwide pandemic has taken millions of lives and hundreds of millions have lost their jobs, their health, and their peace. Vaccines are being distributed and treatments are improving, but many are still lonely, tired, grieving, and stressed out.

And then there are the ongoing crises of poverty, racism, drug overdosing and environmental degradation. We feel helpless as forces beyond our control "corrupt and destroy the creatures of God," as we say in the BAS baptismal covenant.

It's against this backdrop of all that we are surrounded by that we hear Psalm 23 today. What guidance does this psalm provide for us?

*We must be attuned to our own needs and the needs of others.* Throughout the Scriptures, we find stories of faith communities caring for their members, as well as the stranger who stands at the gate. If we choose to follow the good shepherd, we must take care of those who are hungry and thirsty, whether in body, mind, or spirit.

*We also need safe places to rest.* While life is hard and danger is inevitable, the flock needs places of green pasture and still water. Whether this involves participating in community dialogues about racial reconciliation, or volunteering at a foodbank or hot meals program, creating safety is critical for those who have been hounded and harassed for too long.

*And Finally, we need to cultivate a mindset of surplus, not scarcity.* Psalm 23 assures us that God gives good things to overflowing. As human beings, we tend to focus on who has more and fear that there is not enough to go around. But in God's economy, there's not only enough, there's plenty. In order to grasp this reality, we must undergo a conversion of our hearts and minds. We must understand that if any are hungry, all are hungry. If any are unsafe, all are unsafe. If any are alienated, all are alienated. We can't rest in the Promised Land while others are dying in the wilderness.

We need Psalm 23. We need the good shepherd who calls us by name and leads us deeper into love. We need to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and provide safe places for people to rest and restore. We need God's sense of abundance so that our hearts open up rather than shut down. We need to dwell in the house of the Lord, not only in heaven, but also here on earth.

Sustenance, safety, and surplus: this is what life in God looks like, and this is the future we lean toward. Amen