

"I SHALL NOT WANT?"  
Isaiah 25:1-9 Psalm 23  
October 11, 2020  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
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I don't know about you, but I could really use a shepherd right about now.

When I was in high school my family had a flock of Hampshire sheep. Our sheep were pretty much dependent on us for everything. We provided a safe, warm, dry shelter, good food, clean water, fresh straw, medical attention, and we sheared their heavy wool coats a couple of times a year. They had a safe pasture to graze in, but they couldn't fill their own feed trough with grain. They couldn't cut the twine on a bale of hay, and they couldn't reach the handle on the water pump. (Our horse, Gypsy could, but that's another story.)

Most of the ewes didn't need any help giving birth to their lambs, but the few that did were probably very glad we were there.

Our sheep were dependent on us for their survival. It didn't matter if we were tired or sick or busy with something else- the sheep always had to be taken care of. Taking good care of a living, breathing creature is a big responsibility.

These days I could use a shepherd- someone to just take care of everything for me- to make all of the decisions and deal with all of the details of life- from sermon writing to what's for supper. I want someone to do the thinking for me. (It's good I am going on vacation for the next two weeks.)

Since the pandemic hit, I feel as though I am working twice as hard and getting half as much done. It takes longer to do the things that used to be second nature- planning worship, writing a sermon, sending out a coherent email to you, even packing a suitcase.

Anyone else feel this way?

There is a name for this feeling of confusion and mental exhaustion- it is called "brain fog" and it means just what it sounds like. Brain fog is the inability to think clearly. We might have difficulty forming new thoughts or expressing what we're thinking and feeling. Sometimes you may feel as though you can't concentrate or focus. In "normal" times, brain fog often accompanies depression, stress, and anxiety. When you find yourself in a time like we are now- with not only a pandemic, but also political chaos, economic instability, and overwhelming oppression and racism- it's a wonder any of us can think clearly. Mental health experts are seeing a steep increase in emotional distress in recent months. Some warn that it could lead to a national mental health crisis.

It makes sense because we are using a great deal of emotional and mental energy as we try to make sense of our world and to figure out how to respond to it.

One psychologist suggests that we, as a society, are living " *in a collective state of trauma.*" In a recent survey, 56% of the respondents reported that stress or worry related to the pandemic has led to at least one negative mental health effect including trouble with eating or sleeping, increased [alcohol](#) and drug use, frequent [headaches](#) or stomachaches, shorter tempers, and other health problems.

Looks like we really do need a Shepherd.

Mental health experts offer these tips to maintaining good mental health in trying times. They say we should:

- Try to eat and [sleep](#)
- Try to stay socially connected, even if you can't see others in person.
- Limit news and social media.
- Stay physically active.
- Meditate or pray.
- Seek help from experts.

Does anyone else see the connection between these tips and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm?

The Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann has just published a very relevant book entitled, *VIRUS AS A SUMMONS TO FAITH: BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS IN A TIME OF LOSS, GRIEF, AND ANXIETY.* In the foreword, Rabbi Nahum Ward-Lev writes, "*As a rabbi and a lifelong student of the Hebrew scriptures, I find biblical wisdom speaking into the present moment with more relevance than at any other time in my life.*"

*At this critical moment, many people are sitting with the stark awareness that the world we knew is gone. There is no going back. Humankind faces a pressing and daunting learning challenge. We are called to learn how to peaceably relinquish the old world and how to imaginatively give birth to a new world in which all life can flourish. Seeking wisdom for the learning journey ahead of us, I find myself repeatedly turning to the Hebrew Bible (The Old Testament).*

*These Scriptures were gathered to meet the needs of the Israelite people who had suffered the catastrophe of the Babylonian destruction and subsequent exile in the sixth*

*century BCE. These writings were held sacred because they helped people absorb the loss of the world they had known and offered a vision for a way forward. These writings can provide vital insights to help us meet the challenges of the disaster in our day." (1)*

So if we want to figure out how we can live through this time with our emotional, spiritual, and mental health intact, and move toward a more fruitful and inclusive future, perhaps the writer of the 23rd Psalm can help us.

Just about every time I read the first line of this Psalm I think, "Really? I shall not want?" How is that even possible?

Hear the first verse again from a variety of translations.

From the Inclusive Bible: *"Yahweh, you are my shepherd, I want nothing more."*

From The Message: *"God, my Shepherd! I don't need a thing!"*

From the New Jerusalem Bible: *"Yahweh is my Shepherd, I lack nothing."*

NRSV: *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."*

The image of a shepherd was very familiar to the original readers of this ancient scripture. God is often referred to as a shepherd in the Old Testament. In the New Testament Jesus even refers to himself as a shepherd. *"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."* (John 10:14)

In biblical times the relationship between a shepherd and the sheep was hands-on, personal, and intimate. The sheep grew to recognize the shepherd's voice. The shepherd spent weeks at a time in the wilderness protecting the sheep from dangers seen and unseen.

I loved our sheep. We named every one in our small flock and could easily tell them apart. Each had a distinct personality, and we had our favorites.

The Psalm begins with the writer speaking of God by name. *"God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside still waters. God restores my soul."*

By verse 4, though, the poet shifts from talking **about** God to talking **to** God and the psalm quickly becomes more personal. *"I fear no evil for **you** are with me; **your** rod and **your** staff they comfort me. **You** prepare a table before me."*

Just as with the sheep and the shepherd, the poet recognizes his total reliance and dependence on God and God's presence. God is faithful in providing just what the poet needs- food, water, a path to travel, rest, refreshment, renewed purpose. Even when the psalmist finds himself in the darkest valley, when the shadow of death causes despair, hardship, and fear he knows it is not the end and will not overwhelm him because God is with him.

Notice that the shepherd does not lead the sheep **around** the valley of darkness but right through it. With the shepherd leading the way the poet could face all fears and continue on the right path.

According to the poet, God even prepares a banquet in the presence of those who are out to get him. But those who wish to intimidate, harm, or destroy cannot overwhelm him. Take notice that the enemies do not go away, or suddenly become friends, but their power is no longer a threat because of the presence of God.

Although we often read this psalm at funerals- it is not a psalm about dying, it is a psalm about living. It puts our daily activities- eating, drinking, resting- in a radically God-centered perspective and shows us that God is concerned about every aspect of our lives. The writer declares commitment and trust in the One who leads him because it is God's companionship that transforms every situation.

The theology of Psalm 23 assumes a divine promise. And that promise to the ancient poet was simple: "**I am with you.**" At first glance it may not seem like much but for the Hebrew people who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years it was everything. It meant everything to the disciples of Jesus when he made the same promise to them at the very end of Matthew's Gospel, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And it still means everything to us. Even now, and maybe especially now, in the midst of chaos, illness, and fear.

We are practically drowning in stress these days. Perhaps you have felt a sense of hopelessness from time to time. One of the reasons I love this psalm is because it reminds me of a hope that is bigger than I am. It is a hope that is grounded in the faithfulness of the God who created the universe and the living Christ who walked out of the tomb of death. We find in this psalm a merciful God who stands in unrelenting solidarity with vulnerable humankind.

My hope in this merciful God leads me to believe that even in the midst of this time of crisis, something new is yearning to be born. This pandemic has shown us quite clearly what has not been working in our world for so many people for such a long time. God did not cause this crisis, but I believe that God can do a new thing and build a new world out of the ashes of our past.

Walter Brueggeman reminds us that a new world will come with a cost. We must first acknowledge that the old structure has failed and must be relinquished. Letting go is painful and there will be some in power who will refuse to let go. The devastation of Covid and the ugly reality of White Supremacy can feel overwhelming to us but know that people of faith and good will are working relentlessly to give birth to God's new world of justice, mercy, compassion, peace, and security.

In the coming days and weeks, I urge you in moments of despair and sorrow to turn to Psalm 23 or another text that speaks to you. Remember that the ancient believers read these texts and found *help to absorb the loss of the world they had known and hope in a vision for a way forward.*

When you need a shepherd remember the words of this Psalm and trust that our merciful God is with you always- even to the end of the age. And so is your faith family.

God, my shepherd!  
I don't need a thing.  
You have made me a bed in lush meadows,  
you find me quiet pools to drink from.  
True to your word,  
you let me catch my breath  
and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through  
Death Valley,  
I'm not afraid - when you walk at my side.  
Your trusty shepherd's crook  
makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner  
right in front of my enemies.  
You revive my drooping head;  
my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me  
every day of my life.  
I'm back home in the house of God  
for the rest of my life. (The Message)

May it be so.

Amen.

*End Notes:*

*1-VIRUS AS A SUMMONS TO FAITH: BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS IN A TIME OF LOSS,  
GRIEF, AND ANXIETY, Walter Brueggemann, Cascade Books. 2020. Pp vii-viii,*