

PRAISE INTERNATIONAL
THE LORD – A GOOD SHEPHERD
PSALM 23

Good Morning

Two things happened this week for me that formed the message I am sharing today - first was the slow unfolding of war at whole different level in the middle east and with it the all the looming concerns of all it means – that has left a slow low burning sadness to know the unspeakable horror that so many are facing today. I grew up hearing a regular affirmation of 'Israel' as a nation but have through the last many years tried to also see the difficulty facing the Palestinians.

The second was my surprise to not find mail in mailbox on Monday only to rediscover that it was a National Holiday. That day used to be celebrated on October 12 and for most of my life it was called Columbus day - the day we were invited to remember when Columbus ‘discovered’ the New World. Now it is called Indigenous People’s Day to acknowledge its hard to discover what was already known by the people who lived there. Denise and I have relationships with a Native American born on King Island in Alaska – an Inuit who was unable to secure a Passport 20 years ago because he was not an American citizen? True story.

- There is no lack in the present or past to see how our world and how we have been invited to view it through the lens of conquer and control that's left a trail of pain and brokenness.

One morning this week I awoke, a couple days after the war in the middle east had broken out again, with a foreboding, almost tangible, **funk**. I could not recall my dreams but what was in my body and on my spirit was a kind of heaviness.

- In the past I have really struggled when I feel this heaviness for a couple reasons – first I just don't like it and begin to question myself – what did I mess up – that's likely rooted in my religious background telling me that to feel sad or heavy is 'bad'. Yet it was Jesus who said blessed are those who mourn and lament...yet for me I have always seen this as a deficiency.
- Beloved this is what happens when our minds and bodies begin to imagine a future where we find ourselves without the resources we think we need.
- **We are allowing our mind, our heart, and our body to imagine a future where we are alone - without God.**

After grabbing a coffee I headed to my office with some sense that I was dealing with the effects of the tragic news of the weekend - so I set myself to my regular morning prayer liturgy (when you don't know what to say - say your prayers, that is a phrase worth remembering). My daily liturgy begins with confession and moves into praying the 23rd Psalm.

- Even though I have literally prayed the words of this Psalm countless times - I began to encounter these words in afresh that morning.
- Oh yea this is my confession and my experience...the Lord is my Shepherd and He is with me!
- The Lord is not just the rightful ruler of my life but is a Shepherd and I began to just meditate slowly again – recognizing that I was feeling this sense of heaviness that I needed to surrender again to this reality – The Lord is a Good Shepherd.

The Lord is my Shepherd for most of us that feels very comforting and assuring.

Yet it matters what you mean when you say ‘Shepherd’. The first organized civilization is around 2000 BC according to history were the Sumerian’s. The first Sumerian King recorded is documented as wearing a Shepherds hat as a crown. Something that is well repeated hundreds of years later by Egyptian Pharaoh’s who interestingly wore a cap head dress - to say they were as lethal and capable to

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strike their enemies as a Cobra but they also carried a Shepherds Crook and on at least two instances 300 years before Christ demanded to be referred to as the ‘Good Shepherd’.

This was not a reference to compassion and care but the goal of empire to conquer and control! Words can carry different meanings can’t they? My children calling me their Father is one thing but when the former Soviet Union called Stalin - **the worlds most murderous dictator** - its ‘Father’ it meant something very different.

According to David in the 23rd Psalm we know the Shepherd by what He does and where He is – an unforgettable image we saw in Morocco over and over – Shepherds with their sheep.

- **A Shepherd - not the head of an Empire whose goal is to conquer and control. But a Shepherd who knows and cares for you and whose intent is not to control you but to reveal His compassionate caring love and that is really good news!**

David in the 23rd Psalm already has the inside info that he is become the next leader of the Nation.

- Yet he does not locate God at the top of Empire but as a true Shepherd whose path leads to wholeness and who is **not absent in our darkness but in compassion with us in all things.**
- **The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not be in want - means that He is committed to providing all that I need at His expense!**

The Lord is my Shepherd -

- The most common word used for ‘Shepherd’ in the Hebrew is taken from the word ‘ra’ah’ which is also the Hebrew word for **‘best friend’**
- **David is identifying that the Lord is not a ruler with sword but a friend who is motivated by love to care for the needs of the flock.**

The goal of this Shepherd is care, provision and wholeness - paths of righteousness are about ‘justice’ meaning that they are restoring and reviving. **David is painting a very different picture of a Shepherd not as one who is first concerned about conformity and control but one of care and actual human flourishing - that is what a true shepherd is about!**

- There are many shepherd sounding systems of the world - that are primarily about conformity and control - first do all they can to reveal our lack and then promise that by our consumption we will have what they promise will bring life.
- A Shepherd is defined by what **He is actually doing** and where He is...

In a world where Empire claimed the role of Shepherd - and still does - David invites us to see the Lord as the one who is actually bringing us to wholeness and flourishing.

Can I surrender to a the abundant resource of His provision? Psalm 23:1-3 TPT

Yahweh is my best friend and my shepherd.

I always have more than enough.

2He offers a resting place for me in his luxurious love.

His tracks take me to an oasis of peace near the quiet brook of bliss.

3That’s where he restores and revives my life.

He opens before me the right path

and leads me along in his footsteps of righteousness

so that I can bring honor to his name.

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What He is about is giving us what we need at His expense - that is a Shepherd.
Where is He? With his sheep – He is with me....

Are you with me? I have used that phrase often to ‘check in’ with those I am sharing with to confirm that they are ‘following’ the current thoughts I am sharing. Yet, I wonder how many times my use of that phrase reveals more about me? My need to be assured that what I am sharing is worth their attention. I mean, am I actually inviting people into a communal process of thought or am I simply trying to alleviate my own unspoken fear - that I am actually alone in what I am sharing - ouch! Not one of us enjoys the kind of aloneness that leaves us defenseless to our fears of safety, security, or belonging. The scriptures proclaim a God who meets us in those places, in fact, the Psalmist says *‘even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, You are with me’*.

As I continued reading praying 23rd Psalm I was arrested by the transition of verse 4 - ***You are with me***, is the game changer of all game changers! This is place where the Psalmist moves from a third person description of the Lord as his Shepherd, even in the worst he could imagine- ***the valley of the shadow of death***, into a first person declaration... ***‘You are with me’***.

As I paced in my office I paused and then pulled out my journal and began to write these words *‘How much is fear a failure of imagination, anchored in a sense of lack, that allows our mind and body to be captured by the idea of a future absent of God?’* Absent of a Good Shepherd?

- When we allow ourselves to camp out in this place we are unable to see ‘Who’ is present and what is possible. But the truth remains the same - ***‘You are with me’***. **You**, whose Presence is able to refresh, restore, reverse, repel, and return me to a place of wholeness and rest.

As I looked at this phrase in verse 4, I opened my computer and began to explore these words in the original language. In just a short time **I discovered why some rabbinic teachers consider this phrase to be the most precious and profound phrase in all of the Psalms: ‘Ki Atah imadi’ - ‘You are with me’**. Here are just a few of the phrases and definitions:

- ***‘You are with me’*** = **Sustaining**, Imadi. In **Hebrew** **this** is not just a reference to an identity but to the essence of the whole individual personally present to sustain because ‘imadi’ means that person’s primary concern is to protect and care for, they are alert and ready to act.
- ***‘You are with me’*** = **Support**, Imadi. The root of this Hebrew word comes from both the Akkadian and Persian languages, the **Akkadian** carries the idea of a wounded warrior leaning against something or someone to support them. A comrade to keep them standing and in some cases to keep them from falling.
- ***‘You are with me’*** = **Settled**, Imadi. The root in the **Persian** language reveals a person who is persistent in maintaining the value of something. Jesus told the story of the pearl of great price - the dirt, the obscurity, the lostness of the pearl did not change its value. **Imadi - the person watching knows the value of what He is supporting and protecting!**

Ki Atah Imadi - ‘You are with me’ means the essence of His whole being is in active present tense-sustaining and supporting what He knows to be of great worth.

The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not be in want - You (that Shepherd) are WITH me!

- The opposite of that reality is not just fear but the surrendering of our souls to the shadows of loneliness that leads us to disconnection.

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- We are surrounded by forces that financially benefit from soul-less activity and we also have no lack of options that invite us towards consumption and conformity. These options do not touch our deepest need for communion - the place where we know we are loved, valued, seen, and known. Perhaps, said another way, **we can often give attention and affection to things that leave our soul disconnected leading us to live with a sense of a foreboding shadow...of lack, insecurity, and isolation.**

You are with me! Could it be? The good shepherd who leads us to places of wholeness -who restores and revives EVEN in the valley of deepest and darkest shadows - Could it be?—***You are with me!***

Truth be told its not that hard to imagine a future of lack that can lead our hearts to want to surrender to the shadows of fear. Its not insignificant that it was here that the Psalmist makes this proclamation in the first person - ***“You are with me”***. Our Triune God is a good shepherd who knows how to keep us standing and how to present us with great joy.

- **Perhaps our greatest need is not to attempt to talk ourselves out of fear but rather to surrender to what is true - *You are with me* - no matter what.**
- *You*, who have never distanced yourself from me- *You*, who can keep me from falling- *You*, who knows the value of what you are supporting and watching over.
- **You, are with me!** Even when we don't believe we have value, that we are lost and hidden, dirty and buried in despair...He that is near knows the value of what He protects!
- **This is the essence of hope, the anchor that holds us as we ride the waves of tumultuous times. This is Good News!**

Ki Atah Imadi - one last nugget about this phrase from one Hebrew teacher is that it is written in future perfect tense - meaning, it is *an action that has already occurred - yet it hasn't*. Beloved this is Gospel! The Lord has not only been with us, ***‘He is present with us and will forever always be with us’ –Selah!***

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Closing Prayer

Shepherd of all,
by laying down your life for your flock
you reveal your love for all.
Lead us from the place of death
to the place of abundant life,
that guided by your care for us,
we may rightly offer our lives
in love for you and our neighbors. Amen.

And the secret is simply this Christ in you!
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