

Belonging

Psalm 23

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May 11, 2014

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

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Psalm 23 isn't just one of our favorite passages of Scripture – it was an integral part of the Bible that Jesus studied and read. When Jesus talks about himself as the “good shepherd,” part of what shapes his speech is this Psalm.

I will ask you to join me as we read it together. Listen for the word of God...

Happy Mother's Day.

When it comes to holidays, the church and Hallmark have a different opinion about what qualifies. The Fourth of July, Father's Day, Valentines Day – you can celebrate and get cards for all of these, but they aren't particularly religious.

Mother's Day is a little different. Mother's Day is celebrated in hundreds of countries around the world. Starting in the 1700s, many European Christians celebrated something called “Mothering Sunday” on the 4th Sunday in Lent. On Mothering Sunday, people would migrate back to worship at their closest cathedral – their “Mother Church.”

Mothering Sunday was also one of the few occasions when domestic servants would be given a Sunday off to attend their home church with their families. Children who were household servants were given the day off, too, and – the story goes – they developed the practice of picking wildflowers on their way from their work to church to give to their mothers when they saw them.

In the United States, Mother's Day started in 1908, spearheaded by a woman named Anna Jarvis whose mother, Ann, died a few years before in 1905. Anna's mother, Ann, was a pacifist from West Virginia who treated both Confederate and Union soldiers during the Civil War.

The first "Mother's Day" was celebrated in an Episcopal Church in Grafton, West Virginia as a memorial service to remember the mothers of that congregation. After that day, Jarvis lobbied politicians and business leaders to recognize Mother's Day as an official holiday – a request that President Woodrow Wilson eventually granted in 1914 – proclaiming the second Sunday in May a national holiday,¹ originally intended to be a way to honor mothers whose sons had died in war.

So here we are.

We are gathered together today to worship God – but we have mothers on the brain. Of all the images of motherhood that I have had the privilege of seeing, the picture that lasts is of an infant reaching his or her arms, hoping to be held by their mommy.

I don't know what your house is or was like when it had little children, but if I bring my one year old in a room that has his mommy in it, those arms shoot out and there is only one person in the world who can give him what he needs.

I am sure there are physiological reasons why children yearn for their mothers – when they are itty bitties, they remember the mother's heartbeat reminds of them of what they used to hear in the womb; they find comfort in the way their mommies feel or smell. But at the core, we yearn for our mothers because we understand that they are the person to whom we belong.

And that is one of most important things there is – to belong.

That's why we buy the expensive flowers and the cheesy cards.

It is why today is so hard for those who miss their mother's.

It is why it hurts on this day to think of mothers who miss their children – like those mothers in Nigeria, and Newtown, and even some mothers in this room.

It is one of the most important things is there is – to belong.

At the core, this is what Psalm 23 is about – belonging.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Jarvis (brilliant research, I know...)

In the original language of the Psalm there are exactly twenty-six words before and after “thou art with me.”² Before that line, the Psalmist talks about God (“the Lord is my shepherd...he restores my soul; he leads me in paths of righteousness for his sake). When it matters, though, the Psalmist talks to God – “I will fear no evil; for thou art with me....” It is language of relationship and trust.

In green pastures – thou art with me.
Beside still waters – thou art with me.
Through the valley of the shadow of death – thou art with me.
In the presence of my enemies – thou art with me.
Is there better news than this?

God is with us. We are not alone in life’s journey. Jesus as the good shepherd is *Emmanuel* – which means, God with us. It doesn’t mean we avoid hardship or struggle. But we belong to God and God is present in our lives and in the world. It is what the whole gospel is about.

Think about when you normally hear this Psalm – my guess is that it usually at a funeral or in the midst of a crisis.

I needed this Psalm this week.

I have a friend who is courageously fighting pancreatic cancer that was diagnosed less than a month ago.

I have another friend who just went through a surgery to avoid cancer.
And another friend whose life is coming apart because of poor choices.

When the bottom falls out, what do we do? We reach out to be reminded that we belong. We reach out to remember that life is about more than the disease we suffer, or the death we fear, or the consequences we face. We reach out to the One who promises to shepherd us – to gather us into the flock and keep our life.

When I have read this Psalm at bedsides, and cemeteries, and jail-cells, and funerals – I have seen the power of God in the faces of those who are suffering or dying or grieving. I have watched as the good news of the gospel washes over people – when these words become more than the things we always say and are transformed into a declarations of freedom and grace.

One of the great privileges of what I do is to be present when people are moved by the Holy Spirit – and they understand that the Lord is their shepherd. That they do not have to fear. That all will be well.

² Limberg, James, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

And I've always wondered why we wait to believe these things until the end – or until there is a crisis?
If they are true – why not live in that truth now?

If the Lord is our shepherd, and we shall not want, then why do we spend so much of our time chasing after the things we don't need?

If we belong to the good shepherd, who claims as we are, then why do we insist on proving ourselves to the people who only need us for the bottom line?

If God is with us in the shadow of the valley, then why do we convince ourselves that we are all alone?

If our cups overflow with grace, then why do we so often feel unworthy?

If goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives, then why do we worry about the future and think that the best days are behind?

The power of this Psalm is not only what it speaks to those who need a good word in the midst of death and dying – but also what it says to those of us who are living. If we believe what the Psalm says is true – then we are called to live like it.

Yet too often, I think the reason we don't has less to do with our willful disobedience and more to do with our doubt about whether or not we really belong to the God who promises so much.

About ten years ago as I was grieving the death of my last grandparent, my maternal grandmother – I watched a movie called *Antoine Fisher*. The story was about a troubled young man who was abandoned by his mother and grew up as an orphan. Though intelligent and talented, he fumbled his way through life, restless, and making bad decisions that reflected a belief that since he was alone and his life was his own, he could do what he pleased.

Thankfully, someone took an interest in Antoine's well-being and started steering him along a better path that helped him see that he was connected to the rest of the world. The movie ends when Antoine's grandmother finally tracks him down – after she had spent half a lifetime searching for the grandson that her daughter had abandoned. The last scene is of Antoine arriving at his grandmother's house – walking into to a room with a table weighted down by food and crowded with the family he had never seen. His grandmother who was frail, was seated at the head of the table in a wheelchair. As Antoine came into view, she reaches out to him in an embrace.

In his setting of this Psalm which we will hear the choir sing in a few minutes, the hymn writer Isaac Watts concludes his paraphrase saying:

The sure provisions of my God

Attend me all my days.
O may your house be my abode,
And all my work be praise.
There would I find a settled rest,
While others go and come.
No more a stranger or a guest,
But like a child at home.

And so we are.

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