

Mike Bennett
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 29, 2007

Psalm 23
John 10.22-30

I Shall Not Want

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”
—Psalm 23.1

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Familiar words from the Bible. Perhaps the *most* familiar words from the Bible. As I draw up on 21 years of ordained ministry, I have spoken these words dozens and dozens of times—mostly at funerals, when grieving families long for the soothing comfort of that which is familiar.

And yet, in all those years, rarely have I preached a sermon about it. It has been there—like all of the Psalms—in the background on some Sunday mornings, giving rhythm and pulse to worship services. It has been there at funerals, as I watch spirits being lifted by the ring of familiarity. It has been there in my prayers, which occasionally cycle through all of the Psalms. But, somehow, it has mostly escaped the sermon microscope.

It isn't that I have anything against Psalm 23. I don't. Though I suppose any preacher would have a certain weariness with a passage so often used in the same setting. (Kind of like how Don McLean must think about singing “American Pie,” perhaps.) But sermons have never seemed really necessary. Somehow, the words of Psalm 23 have achieved such icon status that they seem to be self-explanatory.

But, of course, they are not. The Psalm is full of confusing phrases and allusions that cry out for study and elucidation: makes me lie down, still waters, right paths, darkest valley, rod and staff, a table before me, anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Any of these phrases could be probed at length. The poem is rife with all sorts of complicated issues ranging from Hebrew translation problems, to the practices of ancient shepherds.

But all of those things, alas, will have to wait for another day. This morning I'd just like to reflect briefly on the general tone of the Psalm—a tone that has sustained us in times of loss and that, for me, is captured in the very first verse.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” I think I’ve mostly heard that verse as a declaration of will, rather than a description of reality. I shall not want—I shall be content with my life, I shall be satisfied with what I have, I shall not make idle wishes for things to be different than they are. These are not bad thoughts to have. We live in a commercial culture that bombards us daily with advertisements that heighten our wants to dangerously high levels: I want that new car, I want a bigger and nicer iPod like my daughter’s, I want to look like a movie star—just a few minutes a day with the newspaper or TV is enough to make most of us feel like our own lives are hopelessly impoverished and pitiful.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” In our tremendously desire-driven world, such words of moral fortitude can be instructive. I shall not want. I shall not want. I shall not want. They help us to practice what poet Wendell Berry calls “the joy of sales resistance.”

Psalm 23 is well-suited for such disciplinary use, but such use isn’t really true to its original intent. The Psalm has something else in mind. “I shall not want” is better translated as, “I shall lack nothing.” The Hebrew word is *āśēr*, means “lack”—like when the city of Sodom lacked five good people, or when the Israelites in the wilderness suffered no lack of food because God provided manna.¹ The Psalm isn’t so much saying, “Hey, stop wanting!,” as it is saying, “Hey, you don’t need anything else.”

When we understand this, we comprehend that the issue is not our own greed, but rather God’s graciousness. That is what worship does. It shifts the focus from us to God. Good sermons don’t moralize. They don’t tell us what to do. They tell us what God is doing. That’s why the gospel message is called “good news,” and not “nice instructions.”

“I shall lack nothing.” The Shepherd will supply everything; we will lack nothing. God has already promised us everything that matters. For Christians, we hear this as further confirmation of our eternal salvation in Jesus Christ. Psalm 23 is actually a word of grace—an announcement of the reality of God’s care—not a plea for simple living. Until we recognize the fundamental reality that God has provided for us, we will never be able to apply the Psalm to our lives.

We need to hear the deep message of Psalm 23: you shall lack nothing. We need to hear it to still our troubled hearts and to help us to recognize that each of us has a special place of

provision in God's divine economy. Our deepest needs are not only understood, they are met: already and in full. When we know God in Jesus Christ, we lack nothing.

𐤀𐤓𐤅 (𐤀𐤓𐤅) **lack, have a need, be lacking.**

The earliest occurrence of this verb describes the decrease of the waters which prevailed over the earth at the flood (Gen 8:3, 5). The lack is seen in the decrease of the numbers of the righteous in Sodom, i.e. the lack of five from the fifty seen in the decrease of the numbers of the righteous in Sodom, i.e. the lack of five from the fifty Abraham first proposed (Gen 18:28).

𐤀𐤓𐤅 is most frequently used to express the sufficiency of God's grace to meet the needs of his people. They never lack. In the wilderness, when the people followed God's command they never lacked manna (depending on God's daily supply; Ex 16:18). Moses reminded them of this just before they entered Canaan (Deut 2:7) and this became their basis of hope in Canaan (Deut 8:9).

This proved to be so for those who trusted the Lord, e.g. the widow (I Kgs 17:14), the Psalmist David (Ps 23:1), all who seek the Lord (Ps 34:10 [H 11]), and those who worship the Lord (Isa 51:14). He who has a good, God-fearing wife will see his abundance from God through her (Prov 31:11).

Conversely, the lack of bread or other blessings points to God's disfavor because of lack of faith (Isa 32:6; Ezk 4:17).

Ultimately, because of the faithlessness of the people, not only would they sense the lack of blessings but would even credit it to their not serving the pagan gods of Canaan (Jer 44:18). We see how God gave them up to their reprobate minds.

The root occurs in other Semitic languages such as Aramaic, Arabic, and Ethiopic, not, however, so far, in Ugaritic.

Harris, R. L., Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., & Waltke, B. K. (1999, c1980). *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (309). Chicago: Moody Press.