

Love's Pursuit

Psalm 23

April 25, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Psalm 23 [Robt. Alter translation]

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. In grass meadows He makes me lie down, by quiet waters guides me. My life He brings back. He leads me on pathways of justice for His name's sake. Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow, I fear no harm, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff – it is they that console me. You set out a table before me in the face of my foes. You moisten my head with oil, my cup overflows. Let but goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long days.

Some people reason that since God created nature, then nature must reflect some of the characteristics of God. H. S. Haldane, pioneer in modern biological studies, was asked what he could deduce about God from his research. His observations, he said, indicate that God must have “an inordinate fondness for beetles.” As a taxonomist, Haldane was aware that the order *Coleoptera*, which comprises beetles, is the animal kingdom's most populous category, listing species numbering in the thousands.

However, since the Bible is not a biology text and is far more interested in soul than science, scripture nominates a very different animal for which God has “an inordinate fondness” – namely, sheep. No other creature gets more column inches of scriptural print – both the four-legged-wool-and-mutton-producing kind, as well as the two-legged metaphorical kind. As for beetles, not even a beetle-browed Bible scholar can find more than a single reference, located in Leviticus of all places, a dusty corner of scripture where Presbyterians (fortunately!) don't often sweep.

Rural, rustic, bucolic metaphors like sheep and shepherds probably strike us modern folk as a bit quaint, however. Most of us deal with sheep about as frequently as we handle kangaroos, so scripture's most mundane metaphor fails to connect with our routines. But whenever Jesus employed the imagery of sheep, he tapped into a deep stratum of his listener's cultural, religious, and political understandings. His words evoked stories which defined them as the people of God. They were Israel, the chosen, the sheep of God's pasture. “The Lord is my shepherd...,” affirms Psalm 23, and elsewhere in scripture the king, the priests, and the prophets are called shepherds, those who are to shelter, guide, and protect the people. In other words, the moral life of the nation, the duties of political and religious leaders, and evocations of God were all wrapped up in this metaphor.

What the ancient people held together in this way, we modern folks parse into packets of experience which don't necessarily inform each other. We keep our political convictions divorced from our spiritual lives. Our ideas of community get sub-divided into categories of ethnicity, nationality, class, sexual orientation. Issues having to do with economics and wealth, in fact, often become exempt

from many of the moral and ethical constraints we insist apply elsewhere. We are at two with ourselves over whether individualism or the common good, privacy or disclosure is more important.

If it is fair to suggest that in the metaphors of *sheep* and *shepherd* the Bible was evoking for Israel a commonly-held understanding of connection with God and with one another, it is probably accurate to suggest that it doesn't work that well for us. Parker Palmer observes that "...we have been trained in disconnection and taught to distance ourselves...from nature, from God, and from our own souls." Everything, he says, seems to have become "an abstract artifact."

The problem is not simply one of language or of discovering just the right word. Our crisis is one of imagination and soul. When everything becomes an object, as Palmer is suggesting, then what is life's subject? Now that everything can become parsed, dissected, and unraveled, should we begin to think we have solved life because we have identified its parts? The true task of life is not counting beetles, but figuring out what counts. We may not be likely – due to distances in culture, place, and time – to metaphorically consider ourselves sheep, but can we learn to think of ourselves meaningfully as a community, a people about whom God cares inordinately?

So many of the world's great problems evolves from our inability to think of ourselves as a whole instead of parts. We are better at dividing than uniting. Our thinking prizes pieces. So we are individualists, not universalists; we are private citizens, not citizens of the world. And, logically, we think in terms of "God loves me" before "God loves us," which morphs into "God loves us more than God loves them." We are all trained to avoid a herd mentality, but in our wariness we seem to have lost our scriptural flock mentality and squandered our spiritual heritage. It is in Psalm 95 that the idiom is intensified: "He is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand."

We need to grow a new mentality, one that recognizes God's desire that we find union in Christ. We need to see ourselves anew. Palmer tells of contemporary biologist Barbara McClintock who is working to develop new and better strains of corn. "Highly regarded as a world expert in her field, Dr. McClintock was once asked to reveal the technique that made her so able in her field of research. She replied, 'I lean into the kernel. I lean into the kernel.'"

The ancients, for all their ignorance and lack of sophistication, knew better how to "lean into" God, the source and sustenance of existence, than do we for all our sophistication and cleverness. Life can quickly become a tiresome and grief-filled enterprise when nothing seems to hang together. The biblical view of life celebrates intersection over dissection. It understands that what defines our lives is God's graciousness. As Robert Alter's translation of the twenty-third Psalm has it, "*Let but goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life*" It is God's pursuit of us that gives our lives meaning, not our pursuit of success, happiness, or comfort. It is love and mercy's pursuit of us that shapes us toward a community of justice and love where not one of God's sheep is lost, strayed, or fleeced.

This vision is not naïve, pollyannaish, or simplistic. Scripture fully acknowledges life's shattering disasters, hate's ravaging power to threaten and destroy, and how hurt, fear, prejudice, and boredom can work to erode our moral center. In two distinct parts, Psalm 23 takes all these matters very seriously. The opening of the psalm develops the metaphors of sheep and shepherd and celebrates the richness of God's caring for the flock. Part two is an abrupt change of scene. It was a convention in ancient warfare to humiliate a defeated enemy by forcing them to squat in the dust and watch as the victorious army enjoyed a sumptuous feast. This is the tableau the psalm imagines where God, the host, demonstrates the lavish rituals of middle-Eastern hospitality: the anointing with fragrant oil, platters of succulent foods, the bottomless cup of wine.... These themes of protection against danger, nourishment, and lavish caring are recast and reapplied in the parable in John's gospel. Jesus is the shepherd who tenderly cares for us, shelters us, and leads us into righteousness. He is the victorious king who has defeated death and evil and serves us at his table.

That the Lord's table is, indeed, spread in the presence of "enemies" is made painfully obvious to us week after week as the world suffers its tragedies, and as we suffer our fears and illnesses and losses. We know life as an enterprise fraught with surprise, no little of it unpleasant, tragic, confusing. The world's trials are persistent, but far less so than the persistence of God's goodness and kindness in pursuit of us, God's people.

We can't necessarily know the precise pain in someone else's heart, but we know it is there. We can't always know the details of our friends' chronic trials, nor are we free to publicly detail our fears and hesitations, our anxieties and depressions which come upon us and erode our sense of life. We know, however, that all share a common life. Self-doubts assail every parent, anger flares in every household, illness afflicts every body, worry infests every heart and wears down the keen edges of tomorrow's pleasures. Everyone's will flags sooner or later, everyone's sense of purposefulness can become eroded after the corrosion of disappointment. Fear is the stealthy enemy that keeps us looking back, boredom is the enemy that leaves a new day and a new opportunity dead on arrival.

What are life's enemies? Whatever obscures the face of God in our neighbor, whatever diminishes our sense of gratitude, whatever enlarges us at the expense of another, whatever confuses justice with vengeance, whatever smugly washes our hands of responsibility, whatever indulges our wrath, whatever hinders forgiveness, whatever excuses greed, whatever fails to heal, whatever confuses faith with arrogance, whatever causes us to forget that we are the people for whom God shows an inordinate fondness, and so are all the other sheep of his hand, and for whom God wills community.

There are no final answers to these matters, nor magic bullets to fire in their direction of such enemies that can protect us. What we can in faith affirm is that in life's valleys of shadow and in the presence of these "enemies" of life, God seeks to gather what is scattered by fear, and comfort that which is threatened, and spread before us the feast of victory, that in God's goodness and in God's

time all pain, dying, and death will be defeated, and all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. What we can do is set the Lord's table again and again – not merely as ritual, or familiar symbol, but as an act of defiant faith – that as persistent as are the enemies of hope, more persistent still is the God whose victory table is laden with blessings. What we can do is set the Lord's table again and again, to remind ourselves that what is ultimately true about life is not our trials and troubles, not our hesitations and insecurities, not our worries and anxieties. If these are ultimately true for us, if these are what are most real to us, then we have made an idol of our self, to be worshiped or feared.

Instead, we are the people of God...the people of his pasture, the sheep of his fold. This table is not just laid in this calm, lovely place. It is a victory banquet spread in the presence of all the enemies of life, all those pressures and problems that would seek to destroy, confuse, and control us. But there is this table, this place in the heart, where we are reminded that God is still acting, God is still welcoming, God is still protecting, feeding, caring.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons advised, "It is not you who shape God. It is God who shapes you. If then you are the work of God, await the hand of the Artist who does all things in due season. Offer him your heart, soft and tractable, and keep the form in which the Artist has fashioned you. Let the clay be moist, lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of his fingers."

Yes, "offer him your heart, soft and tractable." And, let him feed you at the table of grace.