

***I SHALL NOT WANT?***

**PSALM 23**

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**Rev. John R. Annable**

At the end of our sermon last week on the gospel writer John's description of Jesus as the great Shepherd I said that this morning we would take a look at how our shepherd cares for us and that we would look at the familiar Psalm 23 to find that answer.

One of the problems we have with this Psalm is that it is so familiar and at the same time interpretations of its meanings are various and often misleading. But it also has the problem of being so familiar that we often pay little attention to what we are saying when we read it or repeat it from memory.

In James Cameron's *Titanic*, the priest reads Psalm 23 as the great ship goes down. It's a sure bet that everybody in the movie theater, even those who know next to nothing about the Christian or Jewish faith, will recognize the familiar words of this psalm. St. Augustine is said to have called this Psalm the "*hymn of the martyrs*." And as you know, it is a rare funeral when Psalm 23 does not make an appearance. Bono, lead singer of U2, even wrote a little introduction to the Psalms in which he featured Psalm 23. He said that one of the great things about this is that its meaning is straightforward, obvious to all.

So how shall we interpret a passage of scripture whose meaning is so obvious to all?

Let me say upfront that I am fully aware of the saying that "*only fools step in where angels fear to tread*." (That means that the rash or inexperienced will attempt things that wiser people are more cautious of.) I have never made the claim to being a wise person but it has been suggested that I must be a fool by a few folks over the years.

However, sometimes taking a look at something that is so familiar it is helpful to hear it in a different way—different words. So, I invite you to hear it from the Common English Version of this passage. Some of you may be familiar with it. That version goes like this:

*The LORD is my shepherd.*

*I lack nothing.*

*2 He lets me rest in grassy meadows;*

*he leads me to restful waters;*

*3 he keeps me alive.*

*He guides me in proper paths*

*for the sake of his good name.*

*4 Even when I walk through the darkest valley,*

*I fear no danger because you are with me.*

*Your rod and your staff—*

*they protect me.*

*5 You set a table for me*

*right in front of my enemies.*

*You bathe my head in oil;*

*my cup is so full it spills over!*

*6 Yes, goodness and faithful love*

*will pursue me all the days of my life,*

*and I will live in the LORD's house as long as I live.*

Another thing suggested about this Psalm 23 is that it may be the best known but worst translated into English Psalms in all of Scripture.

For instance, when we focus upon the very first verse, "The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing," we

find a good example. Rather than the more familiar *"I shall not want,"* the Hebrew word is the first-person verb *"to lack."* *"Lack"* is chosen because of its sense of having no shortage.

An example of how this word is used in Hebrew is found in Exodus 16:18. You will recall while the Israelites were wondering in the desert they become hungry and God provided manna. The people were told to gather an *"omer"* per person, an ancient measurement of something. And it was written, *"The Israelites did so, some gathering more some gathering less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing left over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed."*

You ask, how is it possible, even amid exuberant praise for the Lord as shepherd, for the psalmist, or anybody for that matter, to say *"I don't lack anything"*? That's ONE of the things I would like for us to look at closer today.

The psalmist testifies to all, *"The LORD is MY shepherd,"* in a psalm of confidence and trust. No wonder we use Psalm 23 at funerals and think of it in times of trial and difficulty. It's a song of unrestrained, full confidence in the care and love of God. God is no impersonal force, no vague phenomenon that comes and goes. God is steadfast, walking, leading, guiding, keeping us, step-by-step engaging with us, even in the darkest valley.

But then, in the very first verse, the psalmist turns from statements about God—THAT IS TO SAY THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD OR THE NATURE OF GOD, SOMETHING WE KNOW—to say something about God—THAT IS TO SAY A GOD THAT WE EXPERIENCE. *"The LORD is MY shepherd. I lack nothing."* Or, as many of us learned it, *"I shall not want."*

*I lack for nothing?* Come on now. Be honest. *"I lack for nothing"* has got to be an exaggeration. Don't want or need a thing!

Is there anyone here who could honestly say, even in the emotion of a moment, *"I don't lack anything"*?

But think about it another way. It seems to me that some of the best things we do, we do out of our sense that we do indeed lack something. Maybe you are here in church this April morning because you know your need. You are listening to me talk right now because you would like to know more about God. When asked, *"Why do you go to church?"* many people respond by saying something like, *"I know that I could be a better disciple of Christ. I know I have my shortcomings, so I go to church hoping that it will make me a better person."*

Picture the person so out of touch with their true need that they are able to sit down at a banquet and say, *"Thanks, I don't need anything. Not hungry."* Or the student who enters the classroom and announces, *"I know all I need to know. I'll just put on my earphones and listen to music while the rest of you intellectually needy go on with the lesson."*

Can we regard the psalmist's claim *"I want not,"* or *"I lack nothing,"* to be anything more than pious exaggeration, a person out of touch with their true situation?

When a lover says of his beloved, *"She's just perfect, got it all. I wouldn't change a thing about her,"* we cut the man some slack. He's in love and love is blind, and sometimes stupid! Of course, his beloved lacks some things and is not the greatest person in the whole world but loves sometimes exaggerates. Love makes them do it.

The psalmist is in love with *"my shepherd,"* the Lord. Is that why the psalmist blurts out with such abandon, *"I lack nothing"*?

However, as we move along in the rest of the psalm, there is a sense in which the statement that opens the psalm ("The Lord is my shepherd, I lack for nothing") makes sense. As we move through the psalm and listen as the psalmist praises the attributes of the shepherd, as the one who leads, guides, protects, and cares, the statement *"I lack for nothing"* is put in context. The more the psalmist thinks about the loving shepherd, it's as if there is a growing confidence that God is truly a God who meets needs and who is able to be there with

us in all of life's challenges, even when we walk through the darkest valley.

You see my opinion of what I need, and the Lord's assessment of my need, may be different. We live in a culture that is a vast supermarket of desire and my desires quickly get elevated to the level of need and my needs are a bottomless pit.

Maybe the psalm wants to train my sense of need to be more receptive and appreciative of what God provides, even if what is provided is not that which I think I most need.

Maybe that which is never lacking is God. It's good to know that we have one thing that cannot be bought: the love and care of God. Another interpretation of this verse says because the Lord is my shepherd "therefore can I lack nothing." I like that way of putting it. Because the Lord is shepherd, therefore I lack nothing. Because of whom God is, therefore, here's the way I look at my life. I can say "I lack for nothing" because God has me. Think about the opening words of this Psalm a little this week.

The SECOND thing I would like for us to notice in this Psalm is something I had not seen until recently. That is, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all my days of my life." That's the way I was taught to say this psalm. But a look at the Hebrew reveals that, as is so often in the Bible, a word can be translated more than one way. "Goodness"?

The word has many nuances in the Old Testament. Goodness names all those benefits of God's presence. Even in the valley, it is good to know that God stands with us.

Mercy? This is that beloved Hebrew word, *hesed*. The prophets loved that word. *Hesed*. Often translated "steadfast love." Mercy is the word for kindness, persistents of God, even when we are not faithful. God's goodness and kindness follow us.

But the word that surprises me is that word translated as "follow." Goodness and mercy follow me. It's surprising that the Hebrew can also be translated, and most often is translated in the Bible, as pursue me. Goodness and mercy *pursue* me.

Pharaoh's chariots pursued the children of Israel to the sea (Exodus 14:8). "I pursued my enemies and overtook them," sang David after he had triumphed in Psalm 18:37.

Surely goodness and mercy *pursues* me, all the days of my life.

And for me, even in the presence of an old friend about whom I thought I knew everything, there is a ripple upon still waters that gets my attention. PURSUE ME. Here we are, plodding through life, and, oh yes, who's that behind us? Oh, that's goodness and mercy. They're following me? But it looks to me as if they may be *pursuing* me.

It's much the same thought as in that wonderful poem:

*"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;*

*I fled Him, down the arches of the years;*

*I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways Of my own mind;*

*tears, I hid from Him,..*

*and in the mist of*

*From those strong Feet that followed, followed after."*

I don't care how well you think you know the good shepherd of Psalm 23; you don't know him until you've realized that he is a pursuer. There's a difference between being "followed" and "pursued." There's a difference between looking back over your shoulder and finding dear old, predictable, goodness with mercy trudging up the hill behind you only to realize they are not following but they are pursuing you.

"The Lord is my shepherd," we say. The shepherd, when just one stupid sheep strayed from the fold, left the ninety-and-nine out in the wilderness (Luke 15:3-7) and pursued the one lost sheep until he found it. The shepherd pursued until he found the lost.

"You've done all you can do for that boy," friends told them.

"There are limits to what parents can do. He's an adult now. It's time for him to stand or fall on his own. Let him go."

No! The shepherd pursued until he found the one who was lost. *"There are other sheep,"* said the good shepherd, *"they're not of this fold. But I go to seek them as well."* (John 10:16).

*"I lay down my life for the sheep,"* said Jesus. Is there no limit to God's pursuit of us, even unto death?

(Illust)They knew him in their town as a mean old man. Resentful. Bitter. Some said that his bitterness was justified. His beloved wife died giving birth to their one child. The child died shortly thereafter from complications. *"He has reason to be bitter,"* they said in town.

He never went to church. Never had anything to do with anyone. When, in his late sixties, they carried him out of his apartment and over to the hospital to die, no one visited, no flowers were sent. He went there to die alone.

But there was this nurse. Well, she wasn't actually a nurse yet, just a student nurse. She was in training and because she was in training, she didn't know everything that they teach you in school about the necessity for detachment, the need for distance with your patients, boundaries. So she did what only people like her would do—she befriended the old man. It had been so long since he had friends, he didn't know how to act with one. He told her, *"Go away! Leave me alone!"*

She would smile. Try to coax him to eat his Jell-O, which those of us who have been in the hospital and have eaten the Jell-O know was not an easy task to begin with. At night, she would tuck him in. *"Don't need nobody to help me,"* he would growl.

Soon, he grew so weak he did not have the strength to resist her kindness. Late at night, after her duties were done, she would pull up a chair and sit by his bed and sing to him as she held his old, gnarled hand. And he looked up at her in the dim lamp light and wondered if he saw the face of a little one whom he never got to see as an adult. And a tear formed in his eye when she kissed him goodnight. And for the first time in forty, maybe fifty years, he said, *"God bless you."*

And as she left the room, two others remained, Goodness and Mercy, whispering softly in the old man's ear the last word he heard before slipping away into the dark valley. The word was *"Gotcha!"* whispered in unison by Goodness and Mercy.

*"I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I bring them also... So, there shall be one flock, one shepherd"*and I go to find the lost ones.

This shepherd is always out seeking, pursuing. We wander down crooked paths, bob like rejected goods down some raging river, yet he has met us there, pursued us, even into the valley, *"Gotcha!"*

We're in the Sundays after Easter. Maybe that's a good time to recall that after Good Friday, we had about lost our taste for discipleship. The world had its way with Jesus, treated him as it treated all prophets before him, nailing him to the cross, sealing him shut in the tomb. Alone, bereft now, *"like sheep without a shepherd,"* we gathered behind locked doors, so fearful were we.

We were eating, but nobody felt like eating at our funeral meal for Jesus. Then there was a knock at the door. "Who's there?" The door was cracked open, just a little bit. Thomas stared into the darkness, words were exchanged, then he threw open the door and said to the rest of us, *"We're gonna need more wine. Set two more places at the table."* You see, Goodness and Mercy had just arrived. Our shepherd keeps pursuing us even behind locked doors.

Yes, my friends, goodness and merciful faithful love

will pursue me all the days of my life,

and I will live in the LORD's house as long as I live."

Now, let us share together in unison the words of the Psalm, the meaning of which is so obvious to all of us, hoping that it is even more obvious now. It was printed as an insert in your bulletin.