

Sermon

Goodness and Mercy shall follow me

Psalm 23

29th August 2021

© 2021 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

Spring has sprung. Have you seen the first blossom, the daffodils, the freesias? When were on leave before lockdown, we saw some new-born lambs. Recently, Torben told us about the new lambs on his lifestyle block. They were just getting social and gathering together, when a rabbit hopped among them. They were curious about the rabbit (like this photo) and nosing at it when suddenly it popped into a burrow leaving the lambs looking bewildered as if to say, “Where did it go?”

And that brings us to the topic of shepherding and Psalm 23. This is third of a series of sermons on Ps 23. The first was when I expanded on verses 1-3a. We learnt that the word shepherd comes from the same root as best friend. We saw how God provides for us so that we lack nothing. He leads us by quiet waters which are associated with an oasis. And there he restores our souls. You may want to re-read that from our website you will find it on 18th July.



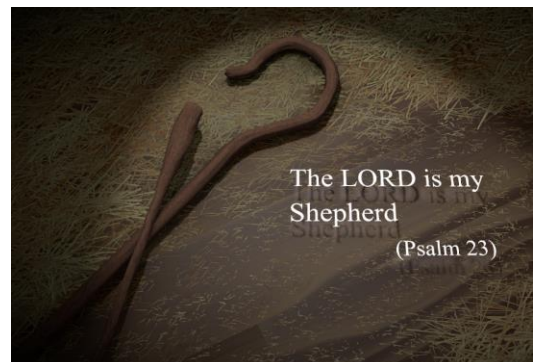
Part 2, you will find on 1st August, when I compared the life of Stephen with selected verses from this Psalm. We explored being lead in paths of righteousness, passing through the deepest shadow and yet not being afraid because the Lord is with us. In all this we are filled with the Holy Spirit and our cup runs over. Finally, we will dwell in the house of the Lord and indeed we saw that we become the house of the Lord in Jesus.

Now we come to fill in the missed verses with more richness to explore, especially for this time of lockdown when it is easy to be discouraged, depressed or fearful. But take heart for this Psalm beautiful addresses this situation with hope – hope that we need in God’s care, protection, goodness and love.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me

Phillip Keller, who wrote “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23”, grew up in East Africa, farmed there and in America. He wrote that traditional shepherds around the world carry two items: a rod and a staff. In the West, we still use the crook but may carry a gun instead of the rod.

Each shepherd made his own rod. He took a sapling including the head of the root bowl and formed it into a club about 2½ - 3 feet long. We could call it a throwing club or the general name is knobkerrie. They can throw them with great accuracy to scare away a predator or use it as a club directly. It is a fighting weapon and serves to execute the authority of the man against aggressors. Sometimes it is used to scare a sheep away from dangerous poisonous weeds or some other danger, by throwing it alongside the animal.



The staff is the crook about 4 feet long with the classic hook. This is unique to shepherds and their role – no other herdsman use such a stick. It was used to guide the flock and when necessary redirect stubborn sheep firmly but gently. The hook could also be used to lift sheep from precarious situations they got themselves into and back into safety. Or could be used to lift a lamb very gently back to its mother without putting the shepherd's scent on it, which might cause it to be rejected. The staff was also used to guide the animals into a sheepfold where they were examined very carefully for injuries and so on.

Phillip Keller wrote that he had even seen shepherds use their crook as a means of contact with individual sheep as they walked beside them. By holding the crook against the sheep's flank they kept a companionable connection with a sheep.

In summary, the rod was used to protect the flock while the staff was to guide the flock and to rescue sheep. Then David the Psalmist says, "Your rod and your staff comfort me."

"Comfort" – it has become a soft word in English usage making us think of soft cushions and sweet food. But its origins are literally strong. It derives from the Latin *confortis* literally *con* (with) and *fortis* (strength or courage). That is how the old English translations meant comfort. But what is the Hebrew word used in Ps23? The Hebrew word is *naham* ¹comes from a root of "breathe deeply" or "breathe again" which then connected to strong feelings of sorrow, compassion etc and maybe the relaxation after a time of tension when you exhale. From there the word developed two meanings: to repent and to console. Rabbi Julian Sinclair explains that the word is more subtle than either meaning but: "Comfort begins when we can reframe the immediate pain of a loss in a larger, more encompassing picture or story." When we are comforted some other idea or feeling occupies our focus from what troubled us before. We change our emotional focus somewhat.

The shepherd's rod is the instrument of authority, protection and defence. For a sheep the presence of the shepherd armed with this club means it needn't be so afraid of a predator or other danger. It is comforted, strengthened to live. It will choose not to be afraid.

The shepherd's staff or crook is the instrument of care, rescue and connection to the sheep. Torben has told me about having *tomo* on his land, where an underground watercourse has hollowed out the soil. At least once, a sheep fell into one of those *tomo* and could not get out again. He found it because of its bleating in distress. When he rescued it, its distress was relieved and it was comforted.

Keller likens the rod to the Word of God. The rod is an extension of the bearer's arm and so indicative of his authority. When Moses (who was a shepherd) was commissioned by God to lead his people out of slavery, it was his shepherd's rod which was the instrument of miracles. It was turned to a snake and back again, it was used to make the Nile blood, to part the waters, to bring forth water from the rock. Keller sees it as representative of the authority and expressed will of God. In the same way, the scriptures are an extension of His mind, will and intentions towards us. From the Word we learn his ways, his promises, plans and his purposes for us. We are warned away from dangers and temptations. Jesus used scripture as a verbal weapon when he was tempted in the wilderness.

Keller then suggests the staff represents the Holy Spirit. The staff is in effect the instrument of contact with the sheep. And similarly it is the Spirit who draws us close to God saying, "Come." It is the Spirit who guides us in the right way, saying, "This is the way, walk in it." The Spirit develops fellowship with us and keeps us in touch with the Lord. And indeed, in the New Testament, the Spirit of God is called the Comforter. The presence of the Holy Spirit is comforting and strengthening for us. He strengthens us to face the troubles of the hour.

Let's think how this might apply to our lives.

The Rod/Throwing Club:

- Do you see that being protected from evil does not mean there is no evil? Can you live at peace in confidence of the Lord's protection even when dangers are around?

The Staff/Crook:

- One of the reasons a shepherd carries a crook is to help their sheep get back on the path. Have you experienced this in your life with God?
- Is there an area where God is guiding you back to the path He's set before you?

¹ Harris et al., *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament*, 1344. Also see Dr Patrick Sookdeho, *Barnabas Aid*, March 2021, p12

Comfort:

- When you find yourself in difficult times, where do you turn for comfort?
- How can you be intentional this week in seeking your comfort in God, our great shepherd who can be trusted?

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

In most parts of the world the best sheep country is the high ranges. In parts of the world, there are called the tablelands – the high plateaus. Good shepherds prepare the grazing grounds. Keller wrote of African shepherds protecting sheep from poisonous plants. He wrote of his own experience of finding a poisonous wild hyacinth on his farm. There were two varieties of this. The blue was fine, but the white was attractive but poisonous to lambs. Just a few leaves cause paralysis and death. So he and his family ranged over the grasslands plucking up these plants to prepare a safe feeding ground for the flock.

The other preparation is to guard against predators so that there is a safe grazing ground.



These lionesses were hungry.

Credit: Anne Aspden

Some people understand this line of the Psalm in the sense of triumph or gloating over the enemies, “Haha I am eating and you have to watch me.” No, it is a picture of safety in the middle of threat. Though the enemies are all around, the flock can gaze safely. Why? Because of the presence of the Shepherd. “For you are with me”.

When Anne Aspden, Helen and I went to Tanzania in 2013 we went on a short safari to Ngorongoro park. There we saw two lionesses prowling around at midday and our guide said they must be hungry

because they normally sleep in the heat of the day.

Soon afterwards, we saw a herd of Zebra about 500m away and he commented they were alert and tense because they knew the lioness was hunting.

Yet other times, zebra graze quietly close sight to lions, unconcerned. This is feeding in the presence of their enemies. At that time, the lion is not threat so they are at peace.

The other way to have peace is when there is someone to protect you, and that is what the shepherd does for the flock. He prepares a table, a feeding place, and they can feed even in the presence of predators, because the shepherd defends them.



These zebra were uneasy and tense near the prowling lionesses.

Credit: Anne Aspden



These zebra are unconcerned in spite of the lioness nearby.
Credit: Brocken Inaglory, (cc BY-SA 3.0), via Wikimedia Commons

Preparing a table can also relate to normal Middle Eastern hospitality. Hospitality has a very high cultural value: the host is obliged to protect the guest. So to eat with someone is to come under their protection. God is a generous host. We receive with gratitude and remind ourselves of his provision and care for us.

You might want to ponder one of these questions: Today our theme is the care of the Good Shepherd. In my last two sermons, I explored Psalm 23, on 18/7/21 & 1/8/21. Since then we have gone back into Level 4 lockdown. The remaining portions of the psalm are relevant to this situation offering encouragement, strength and comfort when we may be feeling challenged, afraid or depressed.

- Are there “enemies” encircling your life right now, seeking to discourage you or perhaps hoping you fail in some way? What comfort do you find knowing God is aware of that, protects you and desires to encourage you in the midst of it?
- The same God who created the world has invited you into his tent and wants to share time with you. What comes to mind when you hear this? Do you believe this to be true? Why or why not?
- To share a meal was a sign of acceptance and love. Where do you need to be reminded today that God loves you and accepts you and wants your cup of joy to be overflowing?

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.

It is the end of the day, it is growing dark and the flock is heading for the sheepfold. Is something following us? This is the prime time for predators – the animals are tired, the gloom makes it hard to be seen. Wolves are particularly likely to attack around dusk.

So is something following us? Yes but not a predator – it is goodness and love!

The word good is *tov* – same word as in the creation account: “and it was good”. In the story of the fall, goodness was spoiled by sin. Contrast between good and evil (*tov* and *rah*), in Genesis 3 and here in Ps 23. We have a longing for justice and goodness. Evil will not win in the end because good is following you. God is working and he is sovereign. Remember when times are not good, that goodness is following you.

Chesed: Loving-kindness: This is actually a deep, abiding, faithful, covenantal love. He will not let us down. Surely goodness and covenantal love will follow me all the days of my life.

To return to the imagery of the flock at the close of the day, we might think of sheepdogs escorting the flock to the fold. (There is mention of sheepdogs in Job 30:1 probably the oldest of the books of the Old Testament.) The shepherd, his dogs and helpers make sure the flock gets home safely.

But it is stronger than that!

Radap means to follow, pursue, chase. It is often used of pursuing an enemy but also as here in the continual following which is achieved but never completed. In this sense, we are to pursue justice – it is a continual practice but never completed. So God’s covenant love and goodness will continually and unrelentingly pursue us through life to bring us ultimately to the safety of dwelling in his house for ever.

So now some questions to ponder:

- Despite any circumstances or struggles, how does knowing that good is on your heels change your current perspective?
- Does it give you hope and courage?
- How will you be inspired to live differently this week in the light of this?

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies.

Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.