

Seeking Guidance

May 3, 2020

Psalm 23

Well, here we are: starting our second full month of self-quarantining with no end in sight. The number of cases continues to rise, and with the mounting cases comes the mounting death toll. I've recently announced the continued suspension of all church activities and services through the end of this month, but who is to say that we won't just push it off another fifteen days or another month? While we push forward, trying to remain hopeful in the midst of what seems a hopeless endeavor, we nonetheless find ourselves asking questions of God as if we wish to put Him on trial. "Why me/us?" "What have we done to deserve this plague?" "Where is God when we need Him most?" These questions and more fill our minds, causing us to temporarily doubt the Love or the presence of God during these trying times. Therefore, we look for answers, trying to find some reassurance that God is with us, looking for some kind of guidance through these days. We find such reassurance and guidance in today's reading: Psalm 23, a psalm commonly used at funerals and memorials services to remind the mourning of God's presence with them during this process of adjustment. In this psalm, we find not only a job description of what a shepherd does but reassurance that the Lord indeed does every one of these tasks.

For example, the first task a shepherd does is guide/direct where the flock goes. Think for a moment on that first verse of the psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me by the still waters." We have here an image of God guiding His children, His "flock" towards sustenance and safety, much as the pillars of fire and smoke guided the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness for 40 years. In John 10, Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd, as the one who guides us through the waters of Baptism to the land flowing with milk and honey. Surely there is some truth to these words, because I'm yet to be steered wrong by Jesus' words and reassurances. Hopefully this is the case with you all as well. Regardless, this leads then into the next part of the shepherd's job description.

The shepherd also provides sustenance. The still waters, the green pastures, the overflowing cup, the prepared table, we have here images of sustenance, things that give and support life. Bear in mind, though, that sustenance is more than food and water. "Sustenance" is a reference to any and all things that keep a person going, that keep them moving forward. So, while it is the food and drink that give us the energy to physically move and to get up in the morning, it is also the reassurance and the hope that "this too shall pass," that "what doesn't kill us only makes us stronger." It's the love God has for us as expressed through the love we share for one another, that love that has no conditions and knows no end. It's the peace that we are not alone in this experience, that we are not facing life's challenges all on our own with no support at all. In short, "sustenance" is also those things that not only give us the energy to physically move, but it is those things that help us to put our feet on the ground, to take that one more step, to face each new and amazing day that the Lord has made, reassured that whatever comes our way, we are never given more than we can handle. As opposed to a hired hand, the shepherd considers the safety of the new destination, taking into account any risks that might come along the way or at the new field. The shepherd assesses whether or not there are risks and, if so,

whether or not the flock can face those challenges with any success. This then leads to the third objective: protection.

A third objective of the shepherd is to protect the flock from any harm that might befall it. If a lion, wolf, or bear were to come along and threaten the livelihood of the flock, the shepherd was to protect and preserve the flock, even at the cost of his own life. Sure enough, we see such an image reflected in Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. If a thief breaks in, the shepherd is responsible for fending off the thief. If a sheep gets lost, the shepherd is responsible for finding that sheep and bringing it back if at all possible. This is an image we often see in Jesus' teachings, particularly in the Parable of the Lost Sheep. In it, the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to go find the one who is lost and brings it back. We learn from it that those that are safe are not in need of protection. Those that are lost, though, they need saving. So too does God go after the "lost sheep" in sending the Son, Jesus Christ, to find us, to save us, and to bring us back. In the psalm, we see this represented in verse 4: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff- they comfort me." In other words, with the Lord guiding and protecting us, we have nothing to fear.

Lastly, the shepherd goes ahead of the flock to look for greater sustenance and to ensure the safety of the flock as they are being led. Recall how Jesus tells his disciples that he is going ahead of them to prepare a place for them. Jesus here is referring to Heaven, to salvation. Knowing then that we are on a journey towards salvation, towards those "green pastures with still waters," towards the Kingdom of God, and allowing God to be our shepherding guide, we find a reassurance similar to that of the final verse of the psalm: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

In short, though we may currently walk through this dark valley where Death seems to be looming over us, though we may not seem to see the end as of yet, we do not walk this seemingly-endless path alone. We walk this path alongside the rest of our flock, alongside the rest of the Children of God, guided by our one and only shepherd, the Lord God Almighty. We walk this path with the hope and love that God grants to us in guiding us and keeping us strong for this journey, and surely there is a purpose to this. Once this is all over, once the quarantines are lifted and the virus is all but gone, once we are together again, we will have arrived at the green pastures with still waters we are promised, our souls restored and our cups overflowing onto a table that has been set out before us. The Lord truly is our shepherd. What more can we want?