

“Thanks: God, My Shepherd, I Don’t Need a Thing!”

Psalm 23

It has been a while since we read the psalms together as part of our Summer Series. July has been interesting with all of our travel plans, mine included. I honestly debated when I was putting this series together whether or not to pick it back up once I got back from General Assembly or go with something new. But I knew I couldn’t end the series on such a depressing psalm like the one we did a few weeks ago. The Psalms themselves certainly don’t let darkness have the last word so I knew that I could not let it have the last word either in our series.

Maybe it was lucky planning on my part but more likely it was divine inspiration and interruption but we pick up the Psalms again today with an old favorite. I will tell you that I can’t help but be grateful whatever the reason maybe that psalm 23 is our starting point once again on our journey through the Psalms for the summer.

Once again, in hearing its verses, it serves as a reminder that no matter how far we roam or wander off, like a good shepherd, God is going to do everything God can to bring us back home. God is going to do everything God can to make sure that we always hear God’s voice, calling us, leading us, guiding us, and reminding us to always say thanks!

Let us turn in our pew Bibles to Psalm 23.

(Read Text) Message Version

I'll be honest, I don't have much to add to this Psalm. We are all familiar with it. Usually, all someone has to do is start saying, "The Lord is My Shepherd" and for the most part, people can fill in the next part---"I shall not want." So I won't bore you with stuff that you may have already heard before. Nor do I promise to pull it apart so much that we can no longer recognize it just because everyone is expecting a sermon this Sunday. This Psalm is what it is. It holds a special place in our hearts for most of us where we can find comfort and peace. For the most part, this is the psalm we turn to when we just need to hear that God is in control.

So I will tell you that my plan for this sermon was to stand up here, read the text, and then sit back down, knowing that the words of this very familiar Psalm say stuff about our relationship with God better than I ever could. But that's not what the church is paying me for each Sunday so I will share that I did a little digging. I was hoping to find God's voice speaking to me a new way through these very familiar words. And boy did I ever hear God speaking.

As I begin the sermon process, I realized it was the same old same old. For the most part, all the commentaries were saying the same thing. Psalm 23 is a

psalm of trust. It is a psalm describing God's care. Yadah, Yadah, Yadah-we all know the drill. Really nothing new. No new insights.

Until well, I read one commentator's statements. He really bugged me with what he had to say about this Psalm. He said that we have missed the edginess of this Psalm through our taming of the shepherd. He continued by saying Sure, shepherds took care of their sheep each day, not because they loved the sheep, but because they needed the sheep. They depended on the sheep for survival."

I'll let that sink in for a bit. The shepherds needed the sheep for survival. So if God is the shepherd in this psalm, was this person also saying that God needs us for survival as well? I'll let that one sink in as well. As I continued to read his statements, all I could think about was-how arrogant! What did he mean that God needs us for survival? God loves us that is why God takes care of us. And on top of that, God is God: Big, Powerful, the Alpha and Omega, was and is, and is to come. Surely, this commentator wasn't saying that God needed us for survival. God, the God we are talking about today, you know, God-needs us for survival.

And as I let this statement sink in, I realized that yep, that was exactly what this commentator was saying. God needs us for survival. God needs us for God's livelihood. God needs us.

As I continued to fume about this outrageous statement all week, in the end after much prayer and conversation with the Holy Spirit, I hate to admit it but I came to agree with this person.

Now before we all get upset with this idea, let me explain. We all know God loves us and cares for us. That is evident in our everyday lives. But I realized something else. Somewhere along the way, we as people of faith have taken God love for granted. We have turned God's love into a reward, into something we are owed rather than being something we appreciate or amazed at as a gift. We know God loves us but do we really get what having God love us means for us as people of faith, how it has opened our eyes to a life beyond our imagining? Do we ever just say Thanks God to express our gratitude for all that God has done for us. Somewhere along the way, our understanding of "The Lord is My Shepherd" became one sided. Somewhere along the way, we as people of faith started thinking about what God can do for us rather than what we can do for God as a way of expressing our thanks for all that God has done for us, for the most part, without even asking? Maybe this commentator was right. Maybe it is time we realize that there is more to this Shepherd/sheep relationship than we realized.

As we take a look at Psalm 23 and when we think about the Good Shepherd, we immediately think sheep. We imagine them wandering around green grass, without a care in the world. We imagine the shepherd sitting close by, playing a

flute, also without a care in the world. But, if we take a closer look at the sheep, we may start to notice that in our imagining, we have tied pretty pink bows around their necks. We have turned these sweet docile sheep into the shepherd's pets. I'll let that idea sink in for a bit.

As I started thinking about this image of docile tamed sheep, the more and more uncomfortable I became with this idea. If this metaphor of God being like the shepherd is going to hold up, and we are imagining that the sheep are the shepherd's pet, then does that mean we are also God's pets?

God's pets. I don't like the sound of that. Sure a pet is something we take care of because we want to. We feed them, bathe them, give them shelter, and yes, even in my household, the pets are the ones that run the house and take up most of the bed. But God's pets. Is that what our relationship with God really is? I know that with my pets, I pamper them. I cuddle them. I pat them on the head. And talk in funny voices to them. But do I really want God to do the same with me?

I'm not sure I like where this metaphor is going. If we do draw the conclusion that we are God's pets, then does that mean God doesn't take us very seriously? Is God is just letting us think we are running the household, putting us in funny sweaters, patting our heads, all just for God's amusement.

That's not the God I know or have experienced in my life. The God I know has shown me grace. The God I know cares about me more than I could ever

imagine. The God I know wants to be in a real authentic relationship with me, a relationship that is so much more than keeping God company or being here for God's amusement. So as I let this crazy metaphor swirl around my head, I admitted that I had to give some thought to this commentator's suggestion that God needs us for survival.

And here is what I was able to come up with in regards to this wonderfully new life giving insight. The thing we must always remember is that yes God does love us. God sent God's only son so that we might live. Yes, God truly does see to all of our needs. We still can take comfort and peace in this thought. However we need to realize that God's actions go beyond just love.

When we experience God's love in our lives, we are transformed. We begin the process of becoming the people God created us to be. When we experience God's love in our lives, we become convicted with the understanding that the Kingdom of God is more than just something we learned about in Sunday school. When we experience God's love in our lives, we actually become God's partners in creation. We are invited to be in a real relationship with God that goes beyond just care and comfort. It becomes about grace and mercy and we realize we are not God's pets. We are God's partners in a very important calling.

By becoming partners with God, we gain the realization we are taken seriously by God. We are not just something for God's amusement. And God

needs us to be actively working here on earth to help bring about the Kingdom of God for all of God's people. Yes, God loves us and it is because of that love, that we can see the potential for what a partnership between us and God could accomplish. We could bring healing and wholeness for all of God's creation. We could make the peaceable Kingdom here on earth a reality.

God doesn't need us nor does God want us just wandering aimlessly about while God pats us on our heads. When God invited us to be in relationship, in partnership with God, God was serious. God knew that there is too much at stake for God not to do so. God has a purpose for us. God has a need that only we can fill. And God is going to do everything God possibly can to make sure that we are taken care of so that purpose can be lived out.

In reality, this psalm is more about God than it is about us as people of faith. It tells us what is at stake for God if God doesn't fulfill God's promises to us. Think about it. If God doesn't take us seriously as partners in God's creation, and if God didn't make sure that we had everything we needed, then how could we talk about or share our experiences with others about how amazing and transformative God's love really is? If God doesn't come through on God's promises, it is not just us who loses out. God loses out as well.

The thing we have to remember is that pets don't go around telling other pets how amazing their people really are. Sure they show us in their own way that

they love us, but there is no buy in or urgency if other pets don't agree with them or experience our care. But by us being partners with God, there is. If we are only here for God's amusement, whose life does that really change?

God truly does have a need for us. God has a purpose for us that is too important for it to be lost or forgotten or worse-for us not to buy into it as God's partners. Sure, Psalm 23 is about celebrating and being thankful that God has taken care of all of our needs but our relationship with God, as God's partners in creation, is so much more than thanks and gratitude. It is about grace and mercy. It is about the all inclusive love of God. As partners in creation with God, our relationship with God goes beyond just me and God. It expands our awareness to include all of God's children. It widens our understanding of the welcome of God. It is what makes us responsible to and for one another.

God depends on us, as God's partners, not as God's pets, to share the blessings of grace and love with others. To share our testimonies about how God's love has transformed us and helped us begin to be the people God created us to be.

Just think about it. God has a lot at risk in this relationship with us. Just like the shepherd in the psalm, when he turns the sheep out into the field, when God turns us loose, God doesn't know which ones will return. God doesn't know where God is going to have to go to bring back the lost ones. God doesn't know which ones are going to get stuck in the bushes or eaten by wolves. Shepherding is risky

business and those sheep are the shepherd's livelihood. Just like we as partners in God's creation, as partners in God's kingdom, are God's livelihood here on earth. Puts a whole new spin on that The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack for nothing phrase, doesn't it!

Our relationship with God is not cute nor is it cuddly. God doesn't pat us on the head and tell us that we are special in sweet and empty way. God has taken a risk inviting us to be God's partners. What we say matters. What we do matters. How we share God's love matters. Not only for us but more importantly or maybe the most importantly, it matters to and for God. Because God needs us for survival.

God is taking a risk by turning us out into the world. God trusts that we will do what we are called to do, not because we are God's pets but because we are God's partners with a purpose.

The enormity of this idea hits us and shakes us to our very core. God was taking us seriously when God invited us to be partners in the Kingdom of God. We are not just placed on this planet for God's amusement. We have a purpose and that purpose is too important for us not to buy into as the living Body of Christ here on earth. God has a need for all of God's children to know that they are claimed and named. God has a need for all of God's children to know that they are God's Beloved in whom God is well pleased. God has a need for us to take our

relationship with God seriously and realize that it is not just about me and God anymore.

There are huge risks for God in this relationship with us as God's partners. But God knows that the risks are worth it. God knows that once we've experienced the daily realities of God's grace and love in our own lives, we don't want to do or be anywhere else. We can't be anywhere but in a partnership with God.

The Kingdom of God is too important for us not to buy in. The healing of God's creation is too important for us not to buy in. The welcome of God is too important for us not to buy in. We are God's partners in this whole thing we call faith and if we don't believe in it, than who is!?

God's very being is at stake when God is providing for our needs. God's own livelihood is at stake when we share the Gospel message. God's own reputation is at stake when God takes a risk and calls us into partnership with God.

All of it is just too darn important for us to ever think that God is only taking care of us because God has to or because God is our God. God takes our relationship seriously. God takes our partnership seriously. Maybe it is about time we do as well.

May we always remember what is at stake each and every time we experience the daily realities of God's love and grace in our lives. Amen.