

“Our Shepherd’s Paths”

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Third in a series on Psalm 23

Psalm 23

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Please read Psalm 23. If you’re reading this online, you can see this Scripture selection [by clicking here](#).

A sheep belongs with its flock.

Sheep are not solitary creatures. They travel together, eat and drink together, lie down and rest together, live life together.

Except when one is separated.

It did not decide to become lost. We don’t either. Perhaps we were not paying attention, absent-mindedly going one way while the shepherd was leading another? A delicious tuft of grass kept us busily munching? Our curiosity drifted our focus? We took a few steps, then a few more, for bit of unwise exploring? Maybe we streaked off in a fit of rebellion? Still, we did not choose to be lost. But a painful realization came to us: we were.

Apparently, when a sheep realizes it’s lost, it shelters in place. It looks for a bush or rock to hide under. Then it bleats. It doesn’t find it’s own way back, but waits to be found. Hopefully the shepherd does, and quickly, before a predator arrives.

This ordeal is terrifying for the sheep, paralyzing. The shepherd might need to carry it back to the flock, so undone is the sheep, unable to bear itself.¹

Our shepherd brings back the lost.

II

That’s what’s going on in the 23rd Psalm. We have left the “green pastures” and “still waters” where sheep want to be, and gone to where this sheep, this disciple, this person of God actually is: lost. Lost, from her flock. Lost from his shepherd. So in desperate danger.

That’s when my good Shepherd, “he restoreth my soul.” I love this phrase, but it might mislead us. It might sound like God’s giving us a spiritual pick-me-up, a recharge when my batteries run low. I need my Shepherd to do that. But in the Psalm, much more is at stake than a spiritual lift.

Survival.

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, [The Good Shepherd: A thousand-year journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 44.

The Hebrew word is *nefesh*. It means more than what we usually think of as our “soul.” *Nefesh* is life, your self, you as a person. What are you without *nefesh*? Dead.

Someone has stopped breathing. A rescuer crouches beside him, joins their mouths, and breathes for him. Seconds stretch like hours. Then the victim sputters and gasps, and begins breathing again on his own. His *nefesh* is back. The rescuer restored him.²

Back to sheep. Lost, cut-off, alone, terrified, in extreme danger. Then, her shepherd finds her and restores her. The Hebrew word is *shuv*. It’s about returning. The shepherd returns the sheep, not only to her flock, but to life. Without such rescuing and returning, she is as good as dead.

Shuv can also mean “repent.” You’re living the wrong way, in how you are with God and with others. It’s the lost way, the going-nowhere-fast way. Then you turn back to the right way. You repent. *Shuv*.

Except in the Psalm, it’s not you who does it. The lost sheep can’t get itself back. She needs to be restored. God your Good Shepherd “repents” you, revives your life, brings you back.³

III

The Psalm’s story keeps going. Having “repented” the sheep back, the shepherd now leads the sheep along “right paths.”

In biblical Israel, sheep were not pastured in well-fenced fields. Their shepherd led them through the wild. Over millennia of grazing, a maze of trails had been worn into the ground. So easily could you follow a wrong one and, again, get lost on a trail that leads nowhere or ends at a cliff (literally, a dead-end).⁴ A good shepherd guides the sheep “in proper paths.”

“Paths of righteousness.” Because this Psalm isn’t really about sheep — it’s about us — “righteousness” works here. It’s goodness, faithfulness to God and God’s ways. For Israel, that’s Torah, the covenant between God and God’s People. What’s the heart of Torah? Jesus said it: acting with love for God, and acting with love for neighbour. He then made that sharper: your neighbour is anyone in need, even your enemy.

² See Alter’s notes on his translation of verse 3. Robert Alter, [The Hebrew Bible. Volume 3: The Writings Ketuvim, A Translation with Commentary](#) (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 70

³ See Bailey’s note about the verb tense used (45). Here I use Bruggeman and Bellinger’s translation and Terrien’s which they cite: Water Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., [Psalms](#), New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 123.

⁴ Bailey, 46.

The word behind “righteous” (*tsedeq*) can just as well be translated as “justice.”⁵ That’s also love. Justice work is taking apart barriers that keep everyone from flourishing.⁶

The paths of righteousness . . . self-giving love, seeking justice. Following Jesus. Our shepherd leads because he is righteous, he is justice in action. He is faithful. He is good. All the time.

Even this time.

IV

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann helpfully sorts all the psalms into three types.⁷

First, “psalms of orientation.” These are for when things are good. There is wellness in the land, justice and peace. Our relationship with God is secure and uncomplicated. Our compass is steady, pointing north. We know where we are and where we are going. We are oriented. Some psalms are for such times.

Then there are, you might guess, “psalms of disorientation.” The compass is spinning, the map is wrong, and we are lost. Things are broken in the world, and in us. We need to lament, crying out against God and, still, for God, hoping Someone is paying attention. The Bible is thick with these “psalms of disorientation.” We do well to use them, because our normal words fail us.

Finally, thankfully, there are “psalms of new orientation.” The compass is pointing us again, but in an unexpected direction. We haven’t found the old map; there is no going back to things as they were. But a new map is being sketched out before us. We can’t explain how this has happened. It’s certainly unexpected. It’s a surprising gift. Grace! This new orientation – new way of going, new way of seeing – Walter Brueggemann says it’s been “wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God.” These psalms celebrate “the intervening action of God to give life in a world where death seems to have the best and strongest way.”

Psalms 23 is a psalm of “new orientation.”⁸ It’s for us sheep who were oriented (“green pastures” and “still waters”), then disoriented (lost and hopeless), and are now being led in new, right paths of righteousness and justice.

⁵ Alter translates the phrase, “he leads me on pathways of justice.” Alter, 71.

⁶ I learned this definition of justice-work from the resource, Resilient Faith: LGBTQ+ Voices in the Church by Generous Space (www.generousspace.ca), 3.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

⁸ Ibid, 154ff.

V

Now.

We are not “oriented” anymore. Can we agree on that?

Disoriented. Sure. Psalms of lament can serve us well these days.

Maybe, though, we are being newly-oriented. I think someday we’ll see that. We’ll trace how the Shepherd has sought us (never really lost us, actually). Then brought us back. And set us on right paths.

I want to be bolder, though, and suggest our Good Shepherd is doing new-orientation work in us now. Jesus is doing new-orientation work in each of us, because the Lord is my shepherd, and yours. He is also our shepherd, together, because sheep belong to their flock.

In other words, I think Jesus is doing new-orientation work with his church, and our congregations, in this time while we are still disoriented. I’m confident of it, because that’s the way he is: always working, slowly and carefully, delightfully and expectantly, when his people don’t have a clue.

I don’t know what. I can see no further than you can, sometimes less. These are only hunches.

Still, I think Jesus is newly-orienting us about what is vital, and what less-important than we thought. For instance, I am convinced, more than ever, that we need to be together. This is okay, for now, while necessary. But it’s not good enough. On the other hand, maybe there are ways we were used to being together, and worshipping together, and serving together, and caring together, that are not the only ways, even not the best ways anymore.

I think Jesus is changing our priorities. He’s giving us a new focus. I don’t know what that is. We’ll need to find out together.

I don’t think we’ll be going back to “normal.” I’m sure Jesus is making us for something new. Honestly, that worries me. I like “normal.” It also excites me. I trust our Shepherd.