

New Thoughts on An Old Psalm by and Old Preacher

A reflection by Dr. Donald W. Haynes

When I look at the night sky, or just sit and think about the enormity of the universe and the minute spec that I am; it takes a leap of faith to really internalize the assurance that God is aware of little old me. To believe in that concept, there is no better metaphor to picture God than the word, “Shepherd.” Jesus even identified himself as “The Good Shepherd.” I am shocked in my naked-eye view of the night sky and to think of Jesus’ words: “Even the hairs of your head are all counted.” (Matthew 10:30) Is that just poetic hyperbole? No, that is biblical truth, but not something I think about often enough as I am bombarded with daily decisions—some trivial or non-consequential, some dealing with the meaning of life as I hold the hand of my dying wife.

Life in general and my life in particular leads me to look anew at the most familiar chapter in the entire Bible—Psalm 23.

I know as little about sheep as I do about astronomy; both are rather foreign to me; yet I want the 23rd Psalm to mean more and more to me as a late octogenarian. I read this Psalm at most of the more than 1000 funerals I led as a clergyman. I have a “high view” of scriptural authority. However, I have a confession; I must identify myself as Isaiah did all humankind: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned to our own way.” (Isaiah 53:6a) Honestly, the psalm did not reach into the cognitive cells of my brain or the emotional confidence of my heart until recently.

My renewed interest in the old psalm took me to a book I read over forty years ago. The author is a man who was an agrologist and became a shepherd in East Africa! His book is entitled *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. His insight into sheep makes the old psalm take on new meaning and warns us as *homo sapiens*. I take pleasure in sharing this treasured psalm with you anew.

The Lord Is My Shepherd

If we have the wisdom and nerve to let the Lord God Almighty shepherd us, the biblical writer’s knowledge of a shepherd’s protective care, comfort and occasional rescue will brighten our path and lighten life’s loads. In Christianity, we add to this by remembering that Jesus said of himself, “I am the Good Shepherd. The sheep hear his voice and recognize it. He calls them by name and leads them and they follow. They will not follow a stranger. The shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. I know my own and my own know me.” (John 10, selected verses) Jesus also told a parable about the shepherd who had ninety-nine sheep safely in the fold and one who had strayed. The shepherd left the ninety-nine to search for and find the one who had strayed. (Luke 15)

As the shepherd, God knows us to the “nth” degree. Jesus also said of God, “Even the hairs of our heads are numbered.” (Matthew 10:30) It is worthy of our lifelong meditation that God is depicted as a shepherd because we are so much like sheep! Sheep follow each other blindly, are easily spooked, have quirky habits unlike any other animals, and even mirror our tendency to bully weaker members of their kind. All of these issues require that sheep have an ever-present shepherd. So do we if we can ever stop doing life our own way.

I Shall Not Want

“I shall not want” would best be translated, “I lack for nothing.” A shepherd manages the care of his sheep, being certain that they lack for nothing that they need to have a good “sheep life.” Turn in your Bible to Deuteronomy 2:7 when the children of Israel are in the wilderness as nomads in a strange and frightening environment. God as their shepherd provided manna and quail and water!

Then in Nehemiah 9:21 you will read about the Judeans after they returned from another season of slavery—this time in Babylon where again they had food, clothing, and shelter. Back in Judah they had freedom but complained about “stuff.” Ezra read them the Book of the Law and prayed aloud to God: “Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, so they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.” Not to “want” also means experiencing a deep, quiet, abiding peace that passes cognitive understanding.

When I was fourteen, my daddy’s death forced Mama and me to leave the rented farm and move to a one room apartment with shared kitchen privileges. At a camp meeting, I learned a gospel song. I do not need a book to recall the words. They were engraved on my psyche:

“I care not today what the morrow may bring, if shadow or sunshine or rain.
The Lord I know ruleth o’er everything and all of my worry is vain.
Living by faith in Jesus above, trusting, confiding in his great love.
From all harm safe in his sheltering arms, I’m living by faith and feel no alarm.”

That became my creed. I had no conception of my future at that time, but three years later I was a college freshman; three months after my nineteenth birthday, I was pastor of a church; ten months after my nineteenth birthday I was a college graduate. I know what it means to live into in the 23rd psalm, “I shall not want.” Mama was right; we worked hard, and God provided.

He Maketh Me to Lie Down in Green Pastures

Green pastures were “few and far between” in Israel but in them food for the sheep was provided. However, the shepherd had to find the “right paths.” Sheep, I learned, are temperamental. A sheep will not lie down until and unless she or he has four certainties:

- They must be free of fear from wild animals, thunder and lightning
- They must be free from friction in the flock, especially bullies of the same gender
- They must have their bellies full and be free from hunger
- They must be free from “sheep flies” and other insects that are biting them.

If the shepherd is present, all these fears ebb, the sheep relax and bed down. The shepherd never tries to force but enables or provides the security and confidence with which they have learned to trust the shepherd. A restless, discontented, disturbed, agitated flock never does well; neither do we when we experience the “people version” of the basic needs of sheep before they can lie down to pleasant dreams. Often before we can sleep, we must “take it to the Lord in prayer.” During the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, they kept hearing about Canaan as “the promised

land, flowing with milk and honey.” To them this meant that the sheep would give milk and the bees would make honey—milk flow and honey flow!

At a critical moment in my own life and career, I learned that I had to lie down before I could look up! Until that night, I had concentrated only on the green pastures; that night I discovered that the predicate was the essence of my lesson in that passage.

He Leadeth Me Beside the Still Waters

Finding “still waters” was the responsibility of the shepherd. Seventy percent of a sheep’s body is water. Thirst made the pregnant ewes abort their lambs and the older sheep get agitated. In a land where water was scarce, the shepherd had to know every day where he could lead his flock to quiet, clean water.

Interestingly, if the shepherd gets them up and out to pasture before dawn, the sheep can live for weeks off the heavy dew! Then, when a stream is found, they will be frightened and not drink if the current were too swift or the banks too steep. They needed accessibility and stillness. The “waters” from which we need to drink must also be clean from springs or deep wells. One of the late Dr. Peter Marshall’s sermons told of the man in an Alpine village whose job was to keep the aqueducts clean as they brought water from the pure driven snow down to the village. When he died, the young city council did not replace him, and people began to die. Finally, they walked the aqueduct and found carcasses of dead animals polluting the water and poisoning the people. When computers first came into usage, the wise teachers reminded us, “Garbage in, garbage out.” It is true of our soul and mind and body. We need the still clean water.

He Restoreth My Soul

Life burdens can almost get us down, and life’s uncertainties undermine our security. However, the psalmist is saying that the Shepherd’s provision is sufficient. Charles Albert Tindley, son of a slave, worked as janitor at a Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. He taught himself to read by pulling newspapers from the trash cans of city streets. Eventually he was called to preach the Gospel. He convinced a Rabbi to teach him Hebrew and learned Greek through a correspondence course from Boston School of Theology. He was eventually appointed as senior minister to the church where he was once the janitor. It had 130 in attendance, and he grew it to 10,200. It was re-named “Tindley Temple” over his objection. He is considered the father of Black Gospel Music. Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina conferred on him an honorary doctorate.

One of his hymns was adapted and adopted as “We Shall Overcome” by the Civil Rights movement. One of the great hymns in many hymnals today is his:

“When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.

When the world is tossing me like a ship upon the sea

Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me.

In the midst of tribulation...when the hosts of hell assail, and my strength begins to fail

Thou who never lost a battle, stand by me.

....

When I'm growing old and feeble...when my life becomes a burden
When I'm nearing chilly Jordan, O Thou Lily of the Valley, stand by me.

Dr. Tindley knew what we can all learn when the Lord is our Shepherd—God will stand by us and restore our soul. To read his biography will convince anyone—white or of color—that we are not to see ourselves as victims but as children of the most high God.

Personally, I was the last boy to be chosen at recess every day! Then a sixth-grade teacher gave me a speech to memorize and assured me she would take me to the school auditorium at recess and, along with a girl, teach us to become public speakers. She taught me to project my voice, to enunciate my words, and to gesture appropriately. Twice in my career, I was defeated almost to the point of despair, but “He who never lost a battle” stood by me and sent a game changer.

He Leadeth Me in the Paths of Righteousness

Shepherds lead sheep along paths that get them to green pastures in a part of the world where grass is scarce. They must move often, or sheep will grass one place to the point that the grass will never grow there again. We must learn both moral righteousness and stewardship of the earth as we meditate on this verse. We have the free wills to walk many different paths, but the Shepherd leads us along a path of righteousness whose ethos is faith, hope, and love.

There is a tradition in Spain that James, a disciple of Jesus, is buried at the town of Santiago de Compostela (“Completion of the Way The town is on the north Atlantic Coast and has a spectacular harbor and beach. The “Camino de Santiago or the “way to Santiago” is marked with a scallop shell on signs, posts, and stones all over northern Spain. The veins of the shell become closer and finally come together so all pilgrims end their spiritual journey to the grave of St. James in Santiago. All along our life journey, we get closer to each other until ultimately, we stand at the foot of Jesus’ cross, kneel and affirm Jesus as Savior from sin and Master of life.

Yea, Though I Walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death

When Joshua was old and full of days, he said to the tribal leaders of Israel, “And now, I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your heart and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you.” (Joshua 23:14a) An old gospel song has us singing, “We all must “walk that lonesome valley; we must go there by our self.” With God as our Shepherd, we approach that time without fear--even without dread if we are indeed “old and full of days,” and have our house in order— all fences mended and forgiven of our sins. Death is an angel, not the grim reaper.

As Christmas, in the year of our Lord, 2020, approaches next week, I am at a totally new place. My wife of sixty-four years is under Hospice care, and they use the least traumatizing language to describe her— “transitioning to the end of life.” So it was that as therapy during her dying days, I use my spare time to research and write a paragraph about each of the one hundred and fifty psalms in the Bible. Naturally, when I reached Psalm 23, my paragraph turned into deep

musings, more research, and I am sharing these thoughts with whoever is “out there” to read them.

We must not live in denial. Unless we die prematurely young, we are faced with losing our ability to drive a car, or even to do the “five last functions of independence for ourselves—bathe, dress, potty, eat, and ambulate. The point is that, yes, we must walk that lonesome valley. The “earthly house of this tabernacle” will dissolve, and we’ll have a house in eternity, not built with hands.” Jesus went to “prepare our dwelling” with which we will be both surprised and pleased. Our relationships there are really an unknown in earthly descriptions, but we shall have moved from salvation to glorification. We leave the destination up to the Lord; our only concern is to be ready when we “go the way of all the earth.”

I Will Have No Fear for You are with me; Your Rod and Staff They Comfort me

Sheep are easily spooked or frightened and need to be kept calm and tranquil. Their sense of security is not within them, but within their trust of their shepherd. Among shepherds in the Middle East and Africa, when a boy “comes of age” he whittles and shapes his rod with which, for the rest of his life, he will guard and guide sheep. The rod can be thrown with great precision, used like a dagger in hand-to-hand combat, or used to prod a stubborn ram or ewe into obedience. To us, most often, the rod of God is a nudge, a warning that we are getting off track, or off plan. The scriptures are often God’s rod gently urging us to get into the Bible.

With COVID in 2020, there is no worship at church for the great majority of Christian people. God’s rod could be a nudge to get back on track by reading or discussing the Bible alone, with a prayer partner, or with the family. Indeed, seeing this happen is one major mission of this blog.

The staff is more like a walking stick with a crook with which he can pull a sheep from a thicket or a crevice in the rocks. Some persons in our life whom God some people as the staff through whom God rescues us when we have fallen, either morally; or by uncertainty, betrayal, disenchantment, or new challenges in the changing new seasons of life. Whatever is on our path, we can face with faithful courage and trust in the Lord without fear if we can pray, **“For thou are with me; thy rod and they staff they comfort me.”**

To be very personal, I am eighty-five, have had a busy, rather demanding life filled with blessings, sprinkled with criticism and conflict, and definitely, the recipient of both God’s rod and God’s staff. All my days have been preparation to get ready to go. When that time comes, if I am conscious, I love the words of Alexander Pope: “By an unfailing trust to approach my grave like one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams.” That is not morbid! I think Tennyson’s words are inspiring:

“May there be no moaning of the bar when I put out to sea...

When that which came from out the boundless deep turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell, and after that the dark.

I hope to see my Pilot face to face when I have crossed the bar.”

St. Paul expressed my feelings about heaven. “Now I see through a glass dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known.” Of course, our Lord

Jesus said it best: “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places. If I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am, there you will be also. I do not conjecture about the detail of the whereabouts and elements of heaven. However, I am confident that even as those who love me here on this “shore” are saying “Goodbye,” perhaps some with tears; there will be those who have preceded me forming a receiving line to greet me to whatever dwelling place the Lord has for me—that is, if I am blessed to squeak, by God’s grace, through the “Pearly Gates.”

In the meantime, I have no fear for God’s rod and staff will comfort me.

Thou preparest a Table before me in the Presence of my Enemies

Preparing a table for us is a challenging idiom to understand. The Spanish and African Kiswahili word for “table” is mesa. A mesa is more than a piece of furniture for serving food; it is a high tableland or mountaintop where the sheep can graze! Before the sheep arrived, the shepherd would have to prepare the table(land). He would check to see there were no poisonous weeds that would make adult sheep sick and kill the lambs. He would scope out a safe area for bedding down at night because the “enemies” were wild animals and robbers. He would put salt and other minerals at strategic places. All of this “shepherding” care took place on the mesa, the high tableland where sheep could graze in safety from enemies. Envisioning this gives special meaning to the verse.

Our Good Shepherd, with his “preparing grace,” goes ahead of our changing life situations and “prepares the table” to give us protection, comfort, and sustaining for life needs. Also, the table might be prepared for human enemies—resisters, bullies, and people who hold us in contempt, jealousy, or envy. The psalmist’s words are metaphors for us to translate into our own culture and time

He anointest my Head with Oil

For a priest this means an oil that has been blessed and is applied to the head of a person kneeling, but for a shepherd it was something quite different. The “sheep fly” would lay eggs on the nose of the sheep which hatched and made its way into the digestive system and either made the sheep lose weight or die. The shepherd would apply a mixture of oil and sulphur to the nose of every sheep! Without that anointing, sheep would continually wipe their noses on the ground or a bush to keep the flies off and could not graze. But the shepherd could protect them with his anointing.

We might pray, “Lord relieve me of the pests in my life—the pettiness, the annoyances, the smart remarks. Today we would add, “some of the Facebook gossip.” Anoint me with the oil of your Spirit so that I can react the way you would. One form of anointing is for Christ to come into our minds. Paul teaches us in Philippians 4:8— “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” The “power of

positive thinking” is superficial, but it is the gate to a new path of not being “nattering nabobs of negativism. “as Spiro Agnew once put it.

My cup runneth over

We associate wine with communion or as a beverage, but the shepherds carried a flask of wine or brandy mixed with water to pour down the mouth of a lamb or sheep when he found one who was chilled or wet with icy rain or sleet. Mixed with water, the alcohol would warm the creature’s body and energize them enough that their body temperature and “friskiness” would help them survive the cold.

Just today a Hospice nurse told me that life “in this tabernacle” is quite near the end for my dear and saintly wife. At age eighty-six, she is dying. For the past fourteen months, my nightly vigil has been to sit by her hospital bed in our home and hold her hand until she goes to sleep. During the night, if she moans a bit, I awaken and see what I can do for her. So, is this not a season of my life to be drowning in sorrow, burdened with regrets, and asking God, “Why?”

NO! I can’t go there and I am teaching the children and grandchildren that we must focus on how blessed we are to have had such an amazing person in our lives—knowing every person’s special dish, remembering every birthday and anniversary with cards and money, being sensitive to every need, and modeling a Jesus-centered life in both “the sunshine hours and when the storm clouds lowered.”

I learned a gospel hymn as a child in my little home church: “Count your blessings, count them one by one; count your blessings, see what God has done.” When family comes, now and after her death, our conversation focuses on what a blessing Joan has been in each of our lives. We must pull up special memories of times she knew just what our need was. All her grandchildren are grown and launched into good lives of their own—with Grandmom’s encouragement and help and undergirding prayers every night. The bottom line in life for us is that “our cup runneth over.”

Surely Goodness and Mercy Shall Follow Me

In Isaiah 40:1, we read, “God will feed his flock like a shepherd.” The verb following goodness and mercy is not best translated as “follow”; it should read “pursue.” God pursues us with his unconditional love. We might give up on God, but God never gives up on us. We need to learn and to teach others that our thoughts about God should not be God as judge, but God as forgiving father. Every prodigal son or daughter who has a waiting father or mother who will welcome them home with open arms is so blessed. We must internalize the reality that when we come home to God, the reception will be mercy, not judgment. Like what Francis Thompson called “the hound of heaven,” the Lord’s preparing and sustaining grace pursues us down the labyrinthine ways of the seasons of life.

And I Shall Dwell in the House of the Lord Forever

“Dwelling in the house of the Lord” does not mean living the church or temple! The word “house” is best translated as “sanctuary” and it means we shall live under God protective care. It

also implies that we will not be lonely or scared because we are in community with others under the shepherd's care. Joan's and my son chairs a committee in a very large Methodist Church who is seeking a new direction for this church that has been blessed with people of wealth and generosity but is now threatened by aging and death. In seeking the best word for a new future, the committee is building ministries around the paradigm they are labeling "connect." The blueprint to a new future is in connecting with and discipling new people.

At every season of life God created us for connectedness, togetherness, community. "My church home" should evoke feelings of belonging, identity, welcome, affirmation, and forgiveness. Church can no longer be an audience of spectators with the preacher as the only speaker. COVID lockdowns are ignoring the cancerous threat of aloneness.

When science advises it and civic authorities allow it, the church must emerge from this dark season of lockdown with a new season of creativity, energy, and imagining. Every church must be training leadership, and motivating stewardship for a new era of dwelling in the sanctuary of the Lord as a connected people for building redemptive, caring relationships, doing deeds of mercy and acts of kindness, and living into the 23rd Psalm! The "house of the Lord" is not a building but a connected community who, as the people of God, hear and follow the Word of God.

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