

Of Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-35
John 10:1-10

There is no doubt that the Twenty-third Psalm, often times known as the shepherd psalm, is one of the most beloved Psalms, if not one of the most beloved of Scripture passages. It is a psalm filled with beautiful metaphors, green pastures and still waters, which depict God's care, right paths depict God's guidance. The "valley of the shadow of death" is a well known metaphor describing a time of death, a time of grief. The metaphor of the Lord as a shepherd describes an intimate relationship between God and his sheep, God and his people. We can have an intimate relationship with God. This psalm is often times recited at the bed of someone who is ill, dying, at the time of death, when people are grieving. I am guessing that this Psalm is read at least half of the funerals I have officiated.

There is much more to this psalm. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann clarifies this relationship with God and how this providential God provides for us. The Psalm begins with, "The Lord is my shepherd." Here the psalmist declares a defining relationship with God. It defines who we are, a child of God, a person of God. It defines how we should live, how we should behave. The psalm goes on to say, "I shall not want." I lack nothing. It affirms that God is the satisfaction of all our wants and needs, every kind of need. It is not just referring to a religious yearning. The images of table and cup later in the psalm guards against any kind of spiritualizing of the psalm, for they concern real food and real drink. Because of our relationship to God, we shall not want. This "not wanting" is an underlying theme of this psalm that explains, I believe, why the psalmist was able to recognize and declare his confidence in a God who would care for him. It explains why the psalmist was not anxious.

We need not be anxious for we—as God’s people—do not live under the assumption of scarcity, but under the assumption of abundance. As Christians, we acknowledge God’s abundance. Do you recall when Jesus tells us that we do not need to be anxious? If God provides for the birds, if God clothes the lilies with beauty, then we need not be anxious. The psalm describes a generous God of creation: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” The psalm declares that nothing else is needed or desired.

The ancient Israelites during their formation in the wilderness, learned that God provides. When Israel left their slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years before entering the promised land of Israel. It took forty years for this was a time of forming these freed slaves as the people of God. God sent them bread from heaven every morning, the manna. Thus no one lacked anything. If they did not pick up enough manna, it turned out being enough. If they picked too much manna, it spoiled the next day. No one lacks. No one wants. The God of creation, the providential God, provides for our needs. We live in abundance.

However, we live in a context, a society, of scarcity. The assumption is that there is not enough to go around and so we better grab and hoard what we can. We buy, we acquire, we hoard. How does the media get us to buy things? By telling us what we are lacking. They remind us of what we are missing out on. As one advertising expert puts it, the commercials tell us you suck, and if you don’t buy our product, you are not going to be rich enough, smart enough, hot enough. We are reminded 3,500 times a day how deficit and lame we are. These messages create a gap. You need to spend more time

in the club. Advertisers are like crappy friends, they make us feel needy, ugly, and uncool, but we keep them around anyway.

Thus, we live in a rat race that is, as Walter Brueggemann wrote, “propelled by anxiety about scarcity.” The rat race is propelled by the anxiety of scarcity. We live in a rat race of consumerism. We buy more things because we don’t have them, we lack them, our self-esteem demands them. We have bigger homes. In 1973 the average size of a home was 1,660 square feet. In 2014, the average size was 2,679 square feet, an increase of over 1,000 square feet, a sixty percent increase. Our homes are getting bigger and our families are getting smaller. It literally has become a rat race and even though we get caught up in the rat race, we don’t want to be in the rat race. The Urban Dictionary defines a rat race as a frustrating, hard-to-break financial lifestyle, a lifestyle lived by countless people, oblivious to the very nature of it, to a degree that even when called upon, vehemently deny it. Who wants to live like that? And yet, we do! The rat race makes us more anxious. Again, as Dr. Brueggemann wrote: “Worry belongs to a practice of accumulation paralleled by a fear of scarcity.” “The dominant economy is grounded in fear.... The mantra of scarcity tells us that we do not yet have enough. We have not yet done enough. We are not yet enough.”

No wonder to behave as though we have abundance is not easy, is a challenge. To be reminded 3,500 times a day of what we lack screams scarcity at us. Even though we hate the rat race, we are caught up in it without much thought. There is no doubt that that this psalm runs counter to the narrative of our scarcity thinking. This psalm may have struck the beleaguered second-class people of ancient Israel as every bit as idealistic and out of sync with certain lived realities as it does with our distracted and

harried attention spans. As was doubtless the case for Jewish peasants attempting lives of peace, abundance and faithfulness to God's law under Roman occupation, the psalm constitutes a powerfully countercultural summons to our imagination.

God is a God of abundance, not a God of scarcity. Jesus revealed this when he fed 5,000 with baskets of bread and 2 fish, and had twelve baskets of food left over. And when Peter had been fishing all night and caught nothing, Jesus told him to cast his net into deeper water, and they caught so many fish their nets were beginning to tear. God doesn't give us just enough. God gives us more than enough: more bread and fish than we can eat, more love than we dared to ask for.

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Roman Catholic priest, wrote: "God is a generous giver, but we can only see and enjoy God's generosity when we love God with all of our hearts, minds and strength. As long as we say, "I will love you, God, but first show me your generosity," we will remain distant from God and unable to experience what God truly wants to give us, which is life and life in abundance.

What can we do? Until the end of time, until the eschaton, we may never fully sense that we have an abundance. The media message of what we lack will always bring out in us the anxiety of scarcity. In the meantime, we have these signposts like the Twenty-third psalm, signposts of God's abundance. Just as the Psalm begins, "The Lord is my shepherd," we should start each day reminding ourselves that the Lord is my shepherd.

Blessed be the Lord, who has given us
a new birth into a living hope,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.