

Psalm 23

Year A: 4th Lent; 4th Easter; Christ the King

Year A: 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C: Feast of the Sacred Heart

Prayer during the Day: Easter Tuesday; Sunday Week 2 & Week 4

The title reads: 'A Psalm* of David'.

Part One. Exodus journey (23:1-4)

We are on a journey. God, like a shepherd, is looking after us, guiding us to pasture, and to the oasis where we can slake our thirst and find rest. When the time comes to move on, we know that God is with us. When darkness falls and we cannot see, we listen for the familiar sound of the shepherd's staff as it strikes the firm earth and the rocks, and when we are straying we feel the familiar touch of the rod, directing us along the right path. With such care we are confident that we will not stray or lag behind. We are being led and protected by the Shepherd. We trust that we will want for nothing. We are on the right path and with a God who is faithful.

This psalm took on an extra dimension of meaning at the time of the return from exile in Babylon:

Say to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.'
They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;
they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.

– Isaiah 49:9-10

You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

¹YHWH* is my shepherd

– Psalm 77:20

He led out his people like sheep,
and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.

– Psalm 78:52

Listen O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are
enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

– Psalm 80:1

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather
the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and
gently lead the mother sheep.

– Isaiah 40:11

I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all
the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring
them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and
multiply.

– Jeremiah 23:3

Green pastures

¹I want for nothing.

The person who seeks after YHWH lack nothing good.

– Psalm 34:10

We think of the words of Saint Teresa of Avila:

God alone suffices.

**²He makes me lie down
in green pastures.**

My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

– Isaiah 32:18

I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord YHWH. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.

– Ezekiel 34:13-16

The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me: ‘One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.’

– 2Samuel 23:3-4

God has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass.

– Job 38:25-27

We might recall the following scene from Jesus’ life when he was re-enacting for the people God’s nurturing them on their wilderness journey:

Jesus ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.

– Mark 6:39 (see John 6:10)

‘All of me’ translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. If we thirst for God with our whole being, it is our whole being that will be nourished.

O God, you are my God, for you I arise at dawn.
My whole being thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you,
in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

– Psalm 63:1

I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.

– Psalm 143:6

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my whole being longs for you, O God.
With all my longing I thirst for God, the living God.
When shall I come and see the face of God?

– Psalm 42:1-2

Let us listen to Jesus:

Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

– John 4:14

Let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’

– John 7:38

Compare the following:

With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first born.

– Jeremiah 31:9

We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead.

– Isaiah 59:10

Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

– Psalm 139:12

I will be with you.

– Exodus 3:12

Note that at the mention of darkness, God is addressed in second person (‘you’). Instead of speaking *about* God, he is speaking *to* God, reaching out to YHWH in his distress.

^{2b}**He leads me to tranquil springs,
³and restores me, all of me.**

**Because of who he is,
he guides me along the right* paths.**

⁴Even though I am led through a dark valley I fear no evil, for you are with me.

The good shepherd

^{4b}Your rod and your staff comfort me.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

– Isaiah 40:1-2

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For YHWH has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

– Isaiah 49:13

For YHWH will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of YHWH; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

– Isaiah 51:3

I, I am he who comforts you.

– Isaiah 51:12

Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for YHWH has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

– Isaiah 52:9

Let us listen to Jesus, the Good Shepherd:

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

– Luke 15:4-5

Jesus said to them: You will all become deserters; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.

– Mark 14:27-28

Let us listen also to Peter:

You were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

– 1Peter 2:25

I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

– 1Peter 5:1-4

Part Two. Entrance into the Promised Land (23:5-6)

We experience ourselves as fugitives, banished from the community, but welcomed by God into the protection and hospitality of God's home. In God's home we enjoy the comfort of a banquet, yet there is still need to keep moving. We are pursued by enemies, but God gives us his own Goodness and Kindness as escort. They will go with us, and so God will be present with us on the journey to the sanctuary which awaits us.

We might reflect on Jesus the bridegroom inviting us to the nuptial banquet. We might also reflect on the sacraments, especially Viaticum, communion offered to the dying.

They spoke against God, saying,
'Can God spread a table in the wilderness?'

– Psalm 78:19

**⁵You prepare a table
for me in the presence
of my enemies.**

Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.

– Proverbs 9:1-2

You who thirst, come to the waters; and you that have no
money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price. Why do you spend your
money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that
which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what
is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

– Isaiah 55:1-2

Your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume
poured out; therefore the maidens love you.

– Song of Songs 1:3

**You anoint my head
with perfume; my cup
overflows.**

On this mountain YHWH of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food
filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

– Isaiah 25:6

God is providing an escort for the continuing journey.

In your steadfast love you led the people whom you
redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy
abode.

– Exodus 15:13

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If
it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare
a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I
will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I
am, there you may be also.

– John 14:2-3 (see also John 17:24)

**⁶Surely your goodness
and kindness* will be
my escort all the days
of my life. And I shall
dwell in the house of
YHWH my whole life
long.**