

THE SHEPHERD PSALM

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Psalm 23

About a dozen years ago someone wrote a devotional book in a style meant to appeal to teenage street gangs. I recall hearing read from that book a version of the Twenty-third Psalm that began this way:

"The Lord is my probation officer."

The metaphor of the probation officer was carried through quite cleverly in a way that paralleled the shepherd in the original.

A dozen years ago many people took that effort to update the Twenty-third Psalm quite seriously. Today it looks rather ridiculous. But ridiculous or not such an effort reminds us of the problems many people face in trying to relate to biblical literature. The man who wrote the psalm lived in a culture where sheep-herding was part of everybody's consciousness. I do not believe that the author had to have been a shepherd himself to write this lyric. When scholars draw that kind of conclusion I think they underestimate the power of creative imagination. Stephen Crane never served in the army or witnessed any battle. Yet people who fought in the Civil War agreed that his novel, The Red Badge of Courage, was as "true to life" a description of the experience of a young soldier in that war as could be found anywhere. The author of the Shepherd Psalm may not have raised sheep himself. Yet he obviously did know something about the lives of sheep, and as I said, he lived in a culture saturated by the traditions of keeping flocks. If you live in Iowa and are descended from Iowans, raising corn is imbedded in your consciousness whether or not you live in the city or on a farm. Raising sheep played the same fundamental role in the consciousness of the ancient Israelite.

The figures of the shepherd and the sheep were part of this man's religious heritage too. In the sayings of the prophets and in the books of the law there were poetic passages in which the Lord was described as a shepherd and the people of Israel as his flock. The author of the Twenty-third Psalm gave to that image a much more personal significance than it had ever been given before. But people of his own time and place and spiritual inheritance would have no difficulty identifying with his figures of speech.

To us the figure is more remote. Yet even though we have little direct experience with sheep-herding, especially in the Near Eastern style, we feel at home with the psalm because we have been raised on it. We feel ourselves to be part of a spiritual community going back thousands of years that has kept alive the images of this ancient author. We may agree with Fleming James when he wrote:

"Psalm 23 is the supreme classic of the Psalter. For a classic is that which is used and does not wear out, but grows fresh and more satisfying always."

But what of the person in our society who is cut off from the mainstream of our spiritual heritage? What of the person who lives in the streets of an urban slum, cut off from family, from church, who never reads

much of anything, to say nothing of the Bible, and who has no experience of life in the country? Such a person may find it very difficult to get much personal meaning out of this psalm even though it still remains the best known song lyric in the world. Perhaps we in the church need to face up to the fact that there are many people in our society for whom the metaphor of the probation officer communicates more directly than the metaphor of the shepherd.

But is that the only metaphor here? Part of the appeal of this psalm, I think, is that the author sustains and develops his figures of speech. One reason why so much contemporary poetry seems incomprehensible to the average reader is that images keep splintering off in all directions. No doubt there is usually method in this seeming madness, but we suspect at times that what we are reading is an exercise in free association. In contrast, the Twenty-third Psalm keeps the shepherd and the sheep going without extraneous symbols through green pastures, beside still waters, in right paths, through the dark valley. Yet when we come to the last strophe of this song, we do seem to find ourselves in a different setting.

Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil,
My cup overflows.

Most interpreters of the Twenty-third Psalm have felt that the metaphor does shift here. We move from a pastoral setting to that of oriental hospitality. God becomes the host who protects his guest against his enemies, who anoints his head and sets a full table before him. However, at least one contemporary scholar, Samuel Terrien, disputes this line of interpretation. Dr. Terrien believes that the shepherd-sheep metaphor is carried through to the end. He points out that it is still the custom in that part of the world for a herdsman to pull up poisonous weeds and to uncover nests of scorpions and snakes before he leads his sheep into a pasture. Thus the line traditionally translated, "Thou preparest a table..." may refer to the shepherd preparing the pasture for his flock. When the sheep file into their enclosure at night, it is the custom of the Near Eastern shepherd to examine them for cuts and bruises. If need be, he places a healing oil on their heads and there is an earthen cup that he uses to give them a medicinal drink. If Dr. Terrien is right, the picture of the shepherd who cares tenderly for each individual sheep is worked out with even more detail than most of us, who live in a world of probation officers, may have realized.

But now what is the message? It is a mistake to think that when you are dealing with a poem or with a story you can extract a message out of the figures of speech and state that message in other words. The medium is the message as Mr. McLuhan tells us. Still I think we can agree with countless others over the last twenty-five hundred years or so, that this psalm does convey to us through its metaphors a message of quiet trust.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

That is one of the simplest, most straightforward, most comprehensive and most eloquent statements of faith ever conceived. Everything that follows in the psalm is an elaboration of that simple statement. Here we meet a man who with complete confidence surrenders his destiny to the care of Yahweh, his God. Through the centuries multitudes of people have found this

man's faith infectious. They have memorized his words and drawn upon them in time of stress.

As we ponder the profound trust of this poet, there are two features of that trust that seem to me especially important. One feature is humility. Humility always goes along with trust because to trust means to rely on someone else, to depend on another. But the element of humility receives special stress through the metaphor of the sheep.

I once rode in a landrover with a Yorkshire farmer who fed his pigs by driving slowly across a field and throwing feed out of the rear of the truck. The pigs ran along behind. The sheep, the farmer told me, were not bright enough to do that. Sheep, he said, were a stupid animal. I did not like hearing the mentality of sheep compared so unfavorably to that of pigs, but I am afraid that farmer was correct.

Sheep probably have a better image in the Bible than in our culture, but the Bible writers were quite aware of their limitations. They were stupid, they were stubborn and they were always following the crowd even though the crowd was misguided. Either that or they scattered aimlessly. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." They also needed correction. It is noteworthy that the psalmist speaks not only of the rod, but of the staff. The rod was the club used to fend off predators. But the staff was the stick used to prod the sheep and keep them in line. The psalmist says he is comforted - which means, literally, strengthened - not only by the rod, but by the staff. He knows that he requires the discipline of the Lord if he is to make it through the dark valley.

It is humbling to be compared to sheep.

The other feature of trust I find here is that of strength in the face of many hazards. Dr. Terrien writes:

"This supreme psalm of trust is not a pastoral idyll. Its poet, far from being sheltered and protected from historical reality, has passed through grim experiences. Yet his faith has made him triumph, not only over his fears, but also over sadness."

Every day of their lives in that rugged country, the sheep faced dangers. There were wolves, robbers, poisonous plants, steep precipices. The psalmist knew that. "The valley of the shadow of death" is an incorrect translation. The true meaning is "the valley of deep darkness." But death was an ever-present possibility in some of those mountain passes.

Like the sheep in his picture, the psalmist is a person who lives daily with hazards. He has lived that way in the past, and no doubt he expects to live that way in the future. "I shall not want" does not imply that he will be free from trouble in time to come. Still he possesses this confidence that God will not abandon him, that ultimately he and his destiny are in God's hands, come what may. That confidence is the basis of his existence.

Recently I read a book by the Czech philosopher, Milan Machovec, which in English appears under the title A Marxist Looks at Jesus. The original title meant Jesus for Atheists. Machovec organized a seminar on Christianity at the Charles University in Prague and in 1967 was the moving spirit

behind a highly publicized dialogue between Czech Marxists and leading Christian theologians. These activities apparently led to the present Czech government looking on him with some disfavor.

Yet since that dialogue, Machovec has written a remarkably appreciative commentary on the Bible and on Jesus without abandoning his own Marxist perspective. While Machovec does not write directly of the 23rd Psalm, he does say this about the psalms in general:

"Certain basic situations of human life are uniquely expressed, for example, in the Psalms: situations of struggle and failure, of hopelessness depression, and the overcoming of these by new hope; the injuries inflicted by the pains of life and by betrayal of friends, and then the restored faith in mankind; the nearness of death or danger, and the courage to face them; the shame and misery of everyday life, and the lifting up of one's eyes to the hills, whence comes our salvation. Taken over by Christianity and spread throughout the world, the Psalms have for centuries furnished models of the experience and mastery of elementary human situations. It is not easy to overcome these situations without the human 'self' being finally overwhelmed, and these models provide no guarantee that one will succeed; yet when one lives intimately with the Psalms, one has something to rely on in order not to go under in the distressing situations of life, and one can gather enough moral and emotional strength to win through."

The Czech Marxist concludes this passage with a sentence even more surprising:

"In so far as modern man no longer has such models, in spite of all the veneer of civilization and perhaps his superior knowledge of specialized fields, he is morally and emotionally on a lower level than those who do have such models."

Of course, even though he "gathers strength" from the psalmist's words, Machovec takes a very different approach to the "Lord" of the psalm. Even for so friendly a Marxist, "the Lord" can only be something deep within the psalmist himself that he imagines to be above and beyond himself. But it is noteworthy that Machovec appreciates the power of this deep thing inside the psalmist to bring out the highest human possibilities. And he seems to suggest that people were better off with this imaginary projection of a god to give strength and meaning to their lives than are many people in both the Marxist and non-Marxist world who have lost touch with this deepest source of their own humanity.

As for myself, I do not think the psalmist's model will work any more today than in the past unless in some fashion we share his faith in "the Lord."

"For thou art with me."

That is the key line. It is only through relationships with others that we become ourselves, as every good Marxist is ever ready to tell us. It is because the "I" in us finds support in a "thou" that the "I" finds the humility and courage to live in quiet trust through all the vicissitudes of life. Whether in the dark valley or at the banquet table, there are times when we realize that neither our own inner resources nor the re-

sources of our faith
spair. In those
clear, we seek to
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"I fear no
For thou art
Thy rod and

sources of our friends can keep us on straight paths or save us from despair. In those moments of self-discovery, when the human limits become clear, we seek to share the psalmist's trust in that shepherd whose companionship does not fail:

"I fear no evil
For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."