



A FEW THOUGHTS FOR PREACHING “THE 23rd PSALM”

The “Shepherd’s Psalm” is a personal affirmation of faith, credited to Israel’s shepherd-king David, which has been memorized and used by people around the world for 100 generations. Its pastoral imagery is simple enough for a child to understand but can be enriched (for those of us who have never lived with sheep) by a book like Phillip Keller’s 1970 classic *“A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23.”*

Partway through the Psalm the Shepherd becomes the Host, the rural outdoor setting shifts to a table in a dwelling-place, and the third-person address (“He”) becomes more personal & relational (“I/Thou.”) The peaceful pastoral protection and provision that is assured by the presence of the Shepherd is extended to the hospitable table, refreshing oil, and abundance of the overflowing cup. Instead of being tended as sheep, we are now received as welcomed guests.

For Earth Day, I would focus on the outdoor setting in which the shepherd/sheep relationship plays itself out. If the Lord is my shepherd, metaphorically speaking, then I am a sheep... a lamb, a ram, an ewe... an animal! Animals are an important part of our ecology as well a part of the food chain. (To address this, see Michael Tobias *“Voices from the Underground: For the Love of Animals,”* 1999.) Am I part of a flock, or have I wandered off on my own? What would a “good” shepherd do? Am I able to take care of myself, or do I need attention and care?

To lie down in *green pastures* evokes meadows and grasslands. The importance of chlorophyll and photosynthesis to the atmosphere (as well as to the food chain) can be addressed. The difficulty of keeping grass lawns green in the hot California sun (not to mention golf courses in the desert!) raises issues of water use and gardening choices.

For a shepherd to “make” sheep lie down requires that they be free from fear (predators), free from flies (parasites), free from friction (aggression within the flock), & free from hunger (the persistent need). Sheep can survive in semi-arid country, but they need *water to drink* in order to maintain normal body metabolism, vitality, & health.

So do we all.

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