

## What Do I Want?

### Psalm 23

Sundays in Lent: God Answers Life's Questions

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Sunday, March 2, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. O Lord God, our Great Shepherd – may you now give us what we need, as we listen to the Word that you speak to us from ancient times, through Jesus Christ, Amen.

The popular psalmist scholar, Walter Brueggemann, in his commentary on the Psalms, began his comments about Psalm 23 with a certain hesitation: “It’s almost pretentious to comment on this psalm.” I would suggest it’s similar about preaching: it’s almost pretentious to preach about this psalm. Of course, I intend to preach the sermon (some of you may not heave a sigh of relief); but with great deference to many of you who have lived this psalm in your life, through some very dark pathways, I humbly defer to your experience.

Why is this psalm so popular? I believe it is because God’s assertive, but gentle, leadership is what meets our deepest human need. Just ten days ago, we had a memorial service in the Chapel for one of our members, Jean Breckenridge—a wife, a mother, a grandmother. She was a woman who loved the outdoors and wanted the children of the city to have an opportunity be able to experience fresh air and fresh vegetables out in the pastoral countryside. She loved home-grown gardens and food. Two of her grandchildren stood together, at the beginning of that service, in front of the Communion table, after lighting the two candles on the Chapel Communion table, to recite the 23rd Psalm responsively. The simplicity and poignancy of that moment was not lost on anyone. Here was a table of God’s shepherding leadership being set in the presence of our worst enemy— death. And the children were beckoning us into the midst of a pastoral metaphor, to follow that Shepherd, who leads us through the darkest valley.

In the quiet of the moment, one could almost hear the silent yearnings of the members of the congregation: “I want to know that this life is not all there is.” “I need to know there is a God who is greater than death, who can carry us into the next and better life.” “I hunger to know a God who will be with me and lead me through the terrible and trying circumstances of life.” You see, Psalm 23 addresses both our needs, and our wants; our hungers, and our desires: “The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.”

If there is anything true about Americans— we want a lot; we even want it all. We are a culture focused on our wants. One commentary of Psalm 23 noted the words of Alan Greenspan— that our national illness, in fact, is “infectious greed;” and went on to comment:

We need an identity not formed by advertising, but by the knowledge that life and resources are the gift of a gracious God... One of the symptoms of our infectious greed is the general inability to distinguish between our wants and our needs.

Want is often confused with need. We tend to grow up thinking: ‘If I want it, I need it.’ But there is something deep within us that battles between need and want. It labors to birth the nature of our true and deepest desire. While there is a connection between our wants and our needs, Psalm 23 gives us a lens through which we can discern the difference. Most of us have had our physical needs met throughout all of our lives; but many of us may not have had our emotional or spiritual needs met. Because we are so conscious of our physical needs and our material wants, we may not even be in touch with some of those deeper emotional and spiritual needs. Such needs are often muted, next to the noisy demand of our material wants and our physical desires. While we hunger for power and control, it may be that we are starving for a place to serve with grace and humility. While we desire sex, it may cover a deeper need for friendship and intimacy. While we strive to gain wealth, it may be a substitute for our lack of self-esteem and self-worth. While we want position and organizational clout, it may be a smokescreen for our lack of personal authority and inner strength. Some of our wants suppress our real needs.

Other translations of this first verse of Psalm 23 reveal a nuance between ‘want’ and ‘need.’ The translators say: “The Lord is my constant companion. There is no need he cannot fulfill.”

Another says: “You, Lord, are my Shepherd. I will never be in need.”

Another says: “Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need.”

“Yahweh is my Shepherd. I lack nothing.”

“God, my Shepherd! I don’t need a thing!”

Since the Lord is my Shepherd, he meets all of my needs; but he may not satisfy all of my wants. I may live life wanting more — if I am not satisfied within my soul; if my spiritual needs, in fact, are not being met. Maybe you are out-of-touch today with what you really need —and with whom you really need it from. I believe Lent is a time for us to detach ourselves from the superficial wants of our daily lives and get in touch with our deeper spiritual needs.

In his devotional writings, *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas a Kempis says that the desires of the heart are to be examined and governed. The desires are the wants and needs of the heart and there needs to be discernment between the two. And he speaks as if the voice of Christ is speaking—to have us learn about desire. And he says this:

Christ says, "You need to learn to place your desire altogether in subjection to my good pleasure and not to be a lover of yourself, but an earnest seeker of my will. Your desires often excite and urge you forward, but consider within yourself whether you are not more moved for your own objects, than for my honor. It is Myself that you seek."

In other words, my wants may be blocking me from considering my need of knowing and following Christ. What do I want? And what do I need? A Kempis says, "Consider within yourself" the difference between what you want, and what you need. In quiet reflection, you will discover that you need Jesus. You seek the Christ. You want the only One who can meet the needs of your soul. During Lent, I urge you to take a day to reflect on this, in solitude and silence. Or even a half-day; make some space in your life to read this psalm and to pray through it.

In the church over the years, I have heard an expression over-and-over: "This church is not meeting my needs." I have often asked the person who says that, "Can the church really meet your needs?" I believe the church is here to help us find and follow the God who can meet our needs.

And with the very first line of Psalm 23, a key human need is expressed in the words, "Lord" and "shepherd." "Lord" is personal and "shepherd" is directional. I need to trust I can follow this Shepherd in the direction that he leads. Psalm 23 is both a confession of our faith and a commitment to follow the Lord. Psalm 23 is a declaration of commitment that is both a decision (I will choose to follow) and a commitment (to keep following day-by-day). And such a confession declares trust and commitment: where the Shepherd leads I want to follow. I need to follow someone; I will choose to follow this God of Psalm 23.

As you may know, last Sunday, after worship, our congregation received a report from the consulting group, Metanoia Ministries. In this report, there are a couple of paragraphs where we find these words:

On follower-ship... any discussion of leadership would be incomplete without the mention of the corresponding need for 'follower-ship.' Indeed, there is an open question as to whether or not the NPC congregation is lead-able by any leader. Follower-ship is the other half of leadership. Follower-ship is the willingness and capacity to follow a leader even when you disagree.

The essence of follower-ship is discovered when we follow our Lord, Shepherd— Jesus Christ. I have a need to follow someone in my life. I want someone to lead me—even if I am unsure, even if I disagree. And we think this is mostly about human leadership; but at the core of our soul, it is about whether we see God as our leader. Scripture teaches us that God wants to lead us; our Lord is a Shepherd-Leader. "He leads me beside still waters." "He leads me in right paths." The Gospel of John reveals that Jesus described himself as the Shepherd-Leader. Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me... they listen to my voice, so that there will be one flock." Psalm 23 is a declaration that we will follow our Lord as shepherd— that we will follow Jesus as the Good Shepherd. And John asserts, in the Gospel, that our mutual following of Jesus makes us one flock, one church. When we all follow Jesus as individuals, we become one flock, one church. And I want to follow Jesus. I would like you to commit to following Jesus. As I follow and learn to imitate Christ, as Paul said, I ask you to join me in following and imitating Christ with me. As we follow, we learn to lead.

Psalm 23 is a spiritual discipline. We like to repeat it because, I believe, it calls us back to the essentials of who we are, and what we need. It helps us sort through our needs from our wants. William Holladay calls Psalm 23 an 'American secular icon.' It has been repeated so many times at funerals and memorial services that some may treat it as a good luck charm: 'I've got to have Psalm 23 at the service; it just won't be the same.'— as a nice religious addition to an otherwise secular ritual. We sometimes say it more for sentimental value, than we say it as discipline, or commitment.

So today, let us take a long look at Psalm 23. Let us look at it for ourselves, and move from our feeling of comfortableness and settled-ness — to being challenged to follow. As we follow the Lord to this Table today, we see that this Table is "prepared in the presence of our enemies." I need a Lord who can set up a simple banquet in the presence of my enemies. I need a Lord who will meet my needs even when I am under siege by evil. I need a Lord who has the great strength to complete me in my weakness. I need a Lord who pursues me with goodness and mercy, even more vigorously than my enemies pursue me. I need a Lord to outpace them, and catch me before they do. If cancer is attacking my body, I need a Lord who will be with me and fight with me, and attack it. If death is imminent, I need a Lord who has already walked through death to eternal life.

There was a woman who introduced me to the book, Tuesdays with Morrie. Her name was Irene and she was slowly dying of cancer. I had "Fridays with Irene." On Friday afternoons I would listen to her daily struggles, respond to her deepening questions, and affirm her growth in faith. Mostly I listened; because Irene loved to talk. Over the weeks of her dying, I heard her talk herself into trusting God with her life. She went from cynic... to skeptic... to critic... to lyric. She learned to practice Psalm 23 as a life theme song, and then as a spiritual discipline. For her, it was first as a reading, then a recitation, and then finally, a confession of faith. She progressed from stoic ambivalence to an epicurean faith in Jesus Christ just before she died. In the last weeks of Irene's life, I watched God prepare a banquet of soul nourishment in the presence of her enemy— cancer. She was first empty and hungry; then she was hungry to know God. She nibbled at the possibility of belief in the resurrection. And she prayed constantly to "whomever is listening." But then she had a dream about Jesus, and the mantra of Psalm 23 became a song of a new romance. She decided to follow Jesus into death and dying.

I think this is at the core of why we find Psalm 23 so compelling. What do we want? We want a Lord who is big enough... and experienced enough... and capable enough... to lead us through the most difficult periods of life. And that is who we have. Psalm 23 calls us to commit; to follow. Let us pray. O Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Great Shepherd. And so we commit ourselves, by your word now, to follow you through the good times and the tough times. And may you transform our hearts and our minds to be formed by who you are, as revealed to us in this psalm. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.