

I'm curious, what's it feel like to read the 23rd psalm?

It is so familiar to so many people I'm afraid we lose the power of the words.

It is vaguely familiar even to those who rarely go to church.

It is often requested as the scripture choice at a funeral.

Why has it stuck in our heads or our hearts so well?

It might be in our heads because it was required to memorize in some bygone day.

It might be in our hearts because a phrase or two has claimed special meaning at a time when we needed certain comfort or strength or hope or assurance.

Psalm 23 is a poem. It is a love poem to God, written by King David, who used to be a shepherd himself. David begins by identifying God and himself.

The LORD. He's writing to the God whose name is so holy that people used to not dare to say it.

Yahweh. The LORD was substituted. David is not writing to or about just any god, but the LORD, Yahweh. The Jewish God who is above all other gods.

David claims his relationship by saying the LORD is...

The word is means right now, and always right now. As I thought about this, I was happy to realize that it is a way to use another name for God. I Am.

Remember when Moses ...(Exodus 3)

I Am. Not I used to be, or I will be some day, but I Am.

I Am is my personal favorite name for God because it both speaks of eternity, and encompasses all the attributes of God for which we have no words to describe.

And then David finishes his sentence: the LORD is my shepherd.

My means there is a personal relationship involved.

Shepherd would have been the one way David identified best with God.

Having been a shepherd, he knew the extent to which a shepherd would go to take care of his sheep.

He also knew the character of sheep.

It's interesting that in order to call the LORD his shepherd, he was, in effect, identifying himself as a sheep.

That's not the most flattering thing to call oneself.

Sheep have a very strong flocking instinct and fail to act independently. That trait has earned them a reputation of being dumb.

Sheep are easily startled. Sheep have few ways to defend themselves. They wander off and get lost easily.

To accept sheep likeness and claim the lord as one's shepherd is a true confession of faith. And an acknowledgement that the shepherd cares for each member of a universal flock.

The next line, I shall not want, or I shall not be in want, or that's all I need, is to say that God is enough.

That's a very counter-cultural statement.

To say I have enough, no matter how little it is, because I have God as my shepherd, I have everything I need.

He makes me...remember when you were a kid and someone told you to do something and your response was 'make me'.

Maybe you even were at least tempted to say that to your parents a time or two.

And they did. They made you do what they thought was best for you.

David says the LORD makes him lie down.

That is one of the things we need and many of us neglect to let ourselves do, rest

Why would David remark about lying down in green pastures?

Because that is filling another need. Green pastures provide food, sustenance.

A shepherd would move the sheep from place to place so they wouldn't eat the grass too closely rendering the land barren, and he would know where the next green grass would be ready.

David is acknowledging that the LORD has moved him from place to place as well, to the next place of nourishment at just the right time.

And leads me beside still waters...

God the shepherd does not make David do anything by force but by guidance, by leading.

Still waters as opposed to rushing waters, takes away the element of danger, of anxiety, it speaks of peace, adding to the sense of rest and restoration and enoughness that David is claiming.

He restores my soul...

Think of all the things that David has done in his lifetime: growing up the youngest of eight sons in a culture where that would lend very little promise of ever being anything more than a servant to your older siblings and your aging parents;

Being a shepherd, a common vocation, not guaranteed to make you rich and famous;

Unexpectedly being anointed to become king of Israel at some unknown future date; challenging your people's most fearsome enemy and besting him while still a boy;

In the meantime becoming a musician to keep a mentally ill king calm;

Becoming a warrior; being hunted by the king you had served; losing your best friend in battle;

becoming a great warrior king; making the grave mistake of adultery and murder; losing sons; losing respect of a wife; having riches.

He must have grown tired, physically, emotionally, spiritually. I imagine he wrote this poem at a time when he was worn out from life, and in need of rest and restoration and he turns back to the LORD God once again, the very same God who chose him to become a boy king, who helped his aim when slinging a stone at Goliath, who helped him defeat many enemies, and he says he restores my soul by going back to the basics of getting in touch with creation.

He does not write that God is his sword, or his commander in chief of armies, but his shepherd. His down to earth shepherd who restores his soul, his very life force.

For God's name's sake, God guides David on the right path.

God's 'too sacred to be spoken, eternal, no beginning, no end, all encompassing, sustaining, powerful, standard for truth, goodness, beauty and all that is just' name.

For that, David, and we, are led down paths of righteousness, or into right relationship with God and our fellow human beings. For God's name's sake.

David gives testimony that even though he has been in and through some very dark times and places, he felt no fear, for he knew God was with him.

He is comforted as he imagines God having the tools of the trade of a shepherd.

A rod for fending off enemies, and a staff for rescuing sheep when they fall or get trapped.

David as king would have attended many a royal banquet but pens a description of this most meaningful meal that sounds almost like a triumphant picnic. Such a picnic that feels like a banquet confirming the alliance of friendship between man and I Am.

This carries through on the theme of peace and rest and renewal, keeping in mind that enemies are not always people, but can often be fears and doubts that we carry within.

Anointing is still a special ritual today. In the psalm, it refers to being God's chosen, to being singled out and set apart for special commissioning, and yet can be referring again to sheep, whose heads were oiled to ward off vipers as they grazed.

All these simple, yet abundant, aspects of belonging to the Lord God are summed up with a common phrase: my cup runs over. In other words-I shall not want, my cup, my life is overflowing with God's love and caring.

The conclusion of the psalm has progressed from being led to being pursued.

From knowing that 'I Am' leads David to peace, down the road of truth, and through the darkest places and states of being imaginable to being chased by the assurance that goodness and mercy will be following right behind each and every day of his life.

And he will always be welcome in the house of the LORD never rejected, turned away, excluded, or forgotten.

This is a curiously profound choice for a scripture lesson during the season of Easter.

In claiming Psalm 23 as our own confession of faith, we have an outline describing our faith journey, our pilgrimage.

We can confront the power of death, pass through dangers and trials, and trust in the darkest of times in our trailblazing shepherd who is Jesus Christ.

For he too used the name I Am. I am the good shepherd.

My sheep know my voice.

My sheep follow me.

Where? Into that eternal life of light, truth, and restoration found in resurrection.

That's Easter isn't it?

We can write our own psalm or love letter or testimony using whatever language we most identify with and have the same results as David.

We will come to the conclusion that we belong to this great I Am.

There is no better identity to claim than one of God's sheep.

And there is no better place to be than following The Shepherd.

May we have eyes to see that our cups truly runneth over with the everyday blessing of God's presence and that it is enough. Forever and ever, amen.