

## The Lay of the Land - or The Pilgrim's Pathway. Psalm 23

Last week we accepted the invitation of Jesus to Come and See - to spend time with him and to live in that posture of continual coming to see Him. We set our hearts on pilgrimage. Ps. 84:5-7

Today we look at a topographical map that gives the pilgrim the lay of the land. Not marked with roads one must take, but what the pilgrim will encounter in the land through his/her pilgrimage.

With those introductory words let's get to the map as revealed to us in Psalm 23. We often read this Psalm in difficult times because it is a comforting song. It is also instructive about pilgrimage. And it is to this beloved psalm that we turn to get our bearings on our pilgrimage.

Read Psalm 23 - This is the Word of the Lord. So we begin...

**"The Lord is My Shepherd"** says David, a shepherd boy. David knew shepherding but didn't know the Shepherd's name. We do - it is Jesus. Jesus says so himself in John ch. 10. "I am the good Shepherd, I know my sheep, I call them by name, and my sheep know me, they follow me. I have come to give them abundant life. No matter the danger, I lay down my life for my sheep." Knowing ourselves as his sheep and being known by Him is critical for the pilgrim and will be deepened by and through the journey.

### **I shall not want, (I shall not be in want,) (I don't need a thing - The Message)**

Oh Yeah? There are many things I want and some things I really need!! Is this some kind of religious feel good phrase that we throw around but don't really mean? The fact is we will always be wanting and needing. We are living as people being formed - we are "not yet" people living our faith in a "not yet" world. Let me suggest that "I shall not want" must be connected to "The Lord is my shepherd. It means the shepherd is what I need and I can be content in and with Him. Like a sheep totally relies on the shepherd for his life and safety and well-being, so the Christian pilgrim depends on Jesus the good Shepherd. He will provide.

I remember a time when that was tested for me. We moved back to Portland after a 8 +year absence. I felt bereft of friends, home, ministry and every kind of support from doctors to grocery stores! I found myself asking - Jesus, are you enough? And wondering who I was now that I was transplanted. Over the next months and years my circumstances did not change, but He began to show me that He had friends for me waiting to be made and ministry to be undertaken, and solutions to problems that we could never have discovered before we moved. That he truly was enough because...wait for it!

**He makes me to lie down in green pastures, leads me beside the still, quiet waters, he restores my soul. He makes, He leads, He restores!**

The Shepherd cared for me!

The landscape described here by David is life-giving: our spiritual bellies feel full, we're experiencing God's closeness and the blessings of knowing Him - a level of contentment, satisfaction, fulfilled hopes. That was me. It was a time of richness as He revealed Himself to me in new ways even though circumstances had not changed. I came to know him more deeply as I experienced Him in the every day of my needy, needy life. His Word was rich and practical to me and spiritual practices felt soul-enriching. These times of restoration are essential for the pilgrim.

**David goes on to say, He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.**

Although we need such times of refreshment and filling, there is a pilgrimage to make. You know what happens to one who lays around stuffing their mouths with tasty things without exercise! It is time to get up and get on the trail - but which trail? He is leading, but in partnership with him, we must be discerning about the path we take. It is ours to choose.

Jeremiah 6: 16 - "This is what the Lord says, 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls.'"

As you know not every road we could take leads to life. Discerning the path for us is a prayerful task. It is primarily about what kind of life I want to live, what kind of person I want to become. Every day I make choices about my path - do I know Him well enough to know when I have left the path, chosen convenience and comfort over truth, justice, love and service? Do I know who He has made me to be so that I can live out the me He has created? That kind of knowing comes from time spent in reflection on His Word and the Shepherd's life.

Sometime we find ourselves on someone else's path or we get stuck in a rut. I know what disaster can occur when you end up in a rut not of your making. My ski race experience: frequent crashes, hard falls, heading for trouble and going downhill with increasing speed.

My path is not your path nor yours mine. We each have a path to follow. The outline will be similar in that it will reflect the life of Christ in love, hope and grace, truth and holiness, but it will be uniquely ours.

**David continues: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Your rod and staff they comfort me.**

"Even though" - means when. This place is inevitable for each of us. This is the testimony of all of Scripture from the OT prophets to Jesus. We will face trouble in this world. Jesus' promises us this but also that He has overcome the world. So is this a place of disaster?

Let me read further in psalm 84: Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, (not if)

The valley of Baca is a place of thorns. This is not easy territory to navigate. It is frightening and feels like death - the death of dreams, loved ones, health, wealth, security, sickness, suffering. Desperate times will come to us all. Times when life looks thorny and making it through is not a given for any of us.

Is the Shepherd still with me, does he care? Yes, He has a staff with a crook in the neck. It is to pull us back on the path marked out for us. Pull us back from the edge when giving up or giving in feels so tempting. His commitment to my pilgrimage is seen in the rod and staff. Knowing they are in His hands gives comfort and calms our fears in desperate times and places. He reminds us that it is only the shadow of death. He has overcome death.

Reading from Psalm 84 further we see that these desperate times and places can become places of refreshment for those who follow us on the journey.

“As they pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs, the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength!

Our journey through such places can be a source of hope and help for those who will follow and we will be strengthened because we have journeyed that way. Our faith and trust grows and blesses others.

**He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. He anoints my head with oil. My cup runs over.**

The enemy has set an ambush for us but right in the midst of it, the Shepherd has prepared a party, a feast. He anoints my head with oil affirming my identity as His child, bringing healing for the wounds I have received. This means I can stand in the presence of the doubters and detractors and the devil himself to say, I am His and He is mine. I am a child of The King. There is great joy in that knowledge- enough to spill over and flow out of my life for His sake.

**David ends his song: Surely goodness and love shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

When life offers us lemons, it is easy to think that disaster has been dogging our steps. But David says that isn't so. Our pursuers are goodness and love. The Message phrases it this way, “Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.” Love's been following us!!

The Shepherd Jesus is the Love that pursues. The landscape we've transversed reveals His presence and care for us. He is the one who restores, who beds us down in tender grasses, near quiet waters, He revives us. He knows the right path, he goes with us even into the dark and frightening places of life, they too are on the right path - the doctor's office, the hospital, the cemetery, the courthouse, the jail, the places of pain,

loss, sickness, suffering and despair. He whispers, "Don't be afraid. I am with you and I will never leave you." "Don't be afraid" is recorded 365 times in the Bible - one for every day of the year. Why? Because He knows just how dark and dangerous the world can seem. As CS Lewis said - we live in shadowlands. The Shepherd carries the crooked-neck staff and rod to pull us back from the brink and onto the path when we stray or stumble. He pries up the boulders of doubt and fear that would hinder our walk, He beats back vicious enemies. He makes a surprise party for us right in the middle of an intended ambush. He pours the oil of royal identity and healing on us. He reveals that he has been behind us, before us, all around us all the way. The pilgrim path leads to the house of God, our forever home.

Prayer: Oh God, how can we thank you enough for Jesus, Shepherd of love, who leads us, feeds us and is with us all the way. It is true, Blessed are we whose strength is in YOU LORD, we have set our hearts on pilgrimage. We are trusting You, Good Shepherd. Amen

In closing please join me:

"O God You are my God and I will always praise you 2x  
I will seek you in the morning, I will learn to walk in your ways  
Step by step you lead me, And I will follow you all of my days." Amen