

“What Do We Lack?”
Joshua 24:14-18; Romans 11:22-36;
Psalm 23; Matthew 18:12-14

August 17, 2014
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Over the course of the summer we have been working our way into the Psalms. I can't say across the psalms because we haven't gone numerically through the Psalms. There is a way in which I feel the Psalms that we have chosen have led us through what feels like a life journey.

We started out with Psalm 1. It's a wonderful way of remembering how I was taught. At Vacation Bible School this week, our final parable that we talked about was building our house upon the rock rather than upon the sand. Psalm 1 is saying the same thing. It's saying let's be planted along the stream of flowing waters, which is the word of God coming to us, so that we can grow and become the people of God and to flourish.

That's a wonderful place to start, but then, as I walked into life—and maybe some of you have experienced this as well—I began to find that my expectations that life was going to be wonderful all the time didn't quite work out. Some of my expectations were not met. Sometimes I was pretty disappointed. We talked about Psalm 13, which was that individual complaint to God, getting close to saying, “God, I don't think you've got this quite right.” It's kind of telling God that God should change who God is so that things work for me. It's interesting how the Psalm has that story of who we are. At least how I am; I've been there.

The next Psalm we did was Psalm 79, and it was the group complaint. God, this isn't working out for us and because we're your people, you are being shamed, so you should change things. It's almost taunting God to make things work for us, and there also seems to be a way in which the Psalmist depicts us as much as it does God.

Then we went to Psalm 50 where we had God coming and saying, “OK, let's talk about this. Who has the right to contend with me?” God has the right to contend with us, but it leads us to a point of saying, “OK God. I recognize that by embedding me in your people you have saved me from going off in directions I shouldn't have gone. As I have come to worship I have encountered you and found the wonder of who you are. You have come near.”

This led us to the next Psalm, which was 73. In it we saw the Psalmist coming to God very honestly, saying, “God I really wanted to do all these things. It looked like those folks were doing great. I realized that by putting me in your people, you are near and all that stuff would have been for naught. You are my God.”

That sets us up for where we are today with Psalm 23. “Lord, I have struggled with all this stuff but you are my shepherd. I know that I can't do it on my own. I need one to show me the way, to sometimes corral me. You are a King I can serve.” According to

commentaries, the kings of old were sometimes considered to be shepherds. So there's this sense of God as being the Shepherd, the King.

Then it goes on to say *I shall not want*. It's interesting to think about that phrase. It could be translated as *I do not lack*. Do I really lack the sustenance I need? Do I really need something bigger and better? But there are all kinds of things I want, especially when it's somebody else's because then it looks even better.

I shall not want, for the Lord leads me to green pastures, beside still waters. The sustenance I need in spite of the wants I might have. When I listen, I recognize that God leads me in paths of righteousness, of right relationship. God is the one who helps sustain places of food, water, rest, and paths of right relationship that help us find our way for God's name's sake. That's the character of who God is. God wants to lead us to those green pastures, along those still waters, in paths of right relationship with one another and with God.

In that, there is this idea that God is willing to do that, and in a way, God already has. If we think about the world God created, it's an abundant place. It produces plenty to sustain us. It's a place where we can find rest and enjoy life. When I begin to think about that, it becomes my expectation that that's the way it's always going to be. But why does there have to be an invitation from God? Because we have a choice to go a different direction. Maybe if nobody had ever gone in a different direction, there wouldn't be any darkness. I often think that there shouldn't be any darkness in life, but the Psalm almost assumes that there is. It's interesting to me.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... Sometimes I wish that line weren't there because it suggests that we will be invited to walk through. At some point in our lives, we will recognize the shadow and the darkness. It doesn't stop there, however.

I will fear no evil for your rod and your staff, they comfort me. One of the things I've always thought about the rod is more in the sense of "spare the rod and spoil the child." But as I was reading again about it, there's a sense where the rod is an image of a scepter, a rod a king holds, which means through the darkness our King does not abandon us. God is not one who is afraid of the darkness, who at the first sign of a struggle goes away. He is with us. If you think of the staff of a shepherd, especially if you think of the one with the crook, it's for moving sheep around or helping them out of holes. So we have the rod and the staff: the idea of the power of God and the guidance of God. That does not go away in the midst of our darkness. That's for me the wonder of God—to know that I can hit a wall, I can hit those times of incredibly hard places and yet find I am not alone and that God is still speaking into my darkness, guiding me through it.

The Psalm seems to move beyond the valley, where God becomes a gracious host. *You set a table before me in the presence of my enemies.* It's an interesting image, but it suggests that God is going to sustain us, offers us that sustenance in spite of the

hostility of the world around us when things don't seem so much like they fit with what I've learned about what it means to follow God. In the midst of it all, there is a moment where God sets the table and we come and find we are sustained. In that moment, I don't need the biggest sandwich, but I do need the sustenance that God gives.

And then I know *my cup overflows* because what God has done is shown me God's goodness and mercy. The word translated *mercy* is one of those really important words in Hebrew. Sometimes it is translated *unfailing love*, or sometimes *steadfast love*. It's that idea that in God's character, God is loving. God is willing to care for us in spite of all our foibles. In spite of our mistakes, in spite of who we think we've become, in spite of the ways we think we're not worth God's attention, God comes. It's like Jesus looking for the 100th sheep.

It's interesting it's translated *goodness and mercy follow me*. My understanding is that the word there had a more active sense. It's not just that goodness and mercy are following me, they are pursuing me.

As we recognize that God is our shepherd, goodness and mercy, that unfailing love, pursue us in life and open the door to the very things we need most. The things I think we need most as human beings are, one, sustenance, and two, a home. So God's goodness and mercy follow us and we *live in the house of the Lord forever*. We are invited to find that we can come home in God and in that old sense it is really more of a household. We don't come to God all by ourselves, but we come to a family. We get invited into a community. We get to know what it means to be home together.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will live at home with God forever. Amen.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, you remind us you are near. We hear the Psalmist again tell us that you are our shepherd. As we think about who you are—from whom everything came, through whom everything is, to whom everything goes—we are amazed and astounded at how you come, that you have given us the sustenance of this world, that you give us rest, that you lead us in right paths, that you lead us even through the deepest darkness and we find you sustain us, that your goodness and mercy pursue us, and you offer us a home with you and your people forever. Thank you. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.