

The LORD, Our Keeper

June 16, 2002

Psalm 23; 121

Susie, a first grader, was drawing a picture one night. Her mother watched over her shoulder for a few minutes but could not recognize what her daughter was drawing. “Honey,” she asked, “what are you drawing?” Susie responded, “I am drawing a picture of God.” Her mother cautioned her, “But no one knows that God looks like.” Susie responded, “They will when I get through.”

What does God look like? If you drew a picture of God, what kind of picture would you draw? The psalmists attempted to draw pictures of God by using metaphors from their daily life. These metaphors did not capture the fullness of who God is. Instead, the pictures were suggestive. Contemplating these images would lead to a fuller understanding of God. The Bible is, of course, full of such pictures of God. Our text for this week contains three: God as Shepherd, as Host, and as Protector.

THE SHEPHERD WHO GUIDES US

Psalm 23:1-4

Psalm 23 is perhaps the most exquisitely beautiful passage in Scripture. It is certainly one of the best known. This chapter of only six verses and one hundred and eighteen words is truly one of the wonders of the spiritual world. Written about 3,000 years ago, it is so relevant to our needs that it could have been written by the pen of God today. All over the world, in every generation, in every society, this psalm has spoken with relevance to the needs of humanity. More grief has been put to rest by its sweet assurances, and more confidence instilled with its message of hope than by perhaps any other poem ever written. This psalm is commonly known as the Shepherd Psalm. A closer look, however, reveals two pictures of God.

To begin with, the psalmist portrays God as the shepherd who guides us. “The LORD is my shepherd,” the psalmist wrote, “I shall not be in want” (23:1). What does the shepherd do for his sheep? He guides them through the day and meets their every need. At midmorning, when the sheep are hot and thirsty and the sun is beaming down, the shepherd guides his sheep to a place of rest. “He makes me to lie down in green pastures” and “leads me beside quiet waters” (23:2). While they are lying down, the sheep will not eat. This affords them opportunity to cool off and digest what they have eaten. Later, they are ready for a

refreshing drink. But sheep will not drink moving water; perhaps the motion of the waters frightens them. So the shepherd finds a place where the water is still. Sometimes he even builds a little dam on the stream. And there, in the cool waters, the sheep drink. What is the result? After having rested and drunk the water, they are restored.

But sheep cannot spend all of their time lying in green pastures beside still waters. As they move from one place to another, they can easily go astray and become lost. So the shepherd, knowing their poor eyesight and lack of direction, lovingly guides them along the right path. Similarly, not all of our days are lived in a place of solitude and safety. Most of life is lived in the tense and hectic places where pressures pound us from every side, where decisions have to be made, where righteousness and unrighteousness each pull at us to go their way. In the words of the psalmist, “He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

Sometimes the paths traveled by the sheep were treacherous and dangerous. Along such paths, they might easily fall into a crevice. Even worse, wild animals might lunge out at them from the dark shadows. At such times, the shepherd used his rod to defend the sheep against their attackers, and his staff to lift one that had fallen into the crevice. So, figuratively speaking, the sheep were “comforted”—as was the psalmist—because they “knew”—as did the psalmist—that the shepherd would provide the protection needed. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” the psalmist said, “I will fear no evil.”

The psalmist, of course, was not really talking about a shepherd and his sheep. He was talking about God and those who belong to him. The promise contained in this metaphor is that what the shepherd does for the sheep, God will do for us. He will guide us to the places where we can find nourishment and rest. He will guide us down the pathway that will lead us home to the Father. God will walk beside us as we go, preventing us from taking false steps that will lead to our destruction, and defending us from those who would destroy us. God is like a shepherd who guides us.

THE HOST WHO GRACES US

Psalm 23:5-6

The imagery of Psalm 23 changes in verse 5. Here God is not a shepherd who guides us, but a host who graces us with his bountiful provision. In the ancient Near East, when a person arrived as a guest in someone’s home, the properly gracious host provided a servant to wash the guest’s feet and anoint him with oil. Such provision reflected the hospitable

character of the host. A further demonstration of hospitality was the meal the host offered to his guests. “My cup overflows” is a figure of speech that today still suggests bountiful provision. The entire verse conveys the sense that every desire of the guest is more than adequately supplied. While the guest enjoyed the amenities of the home, onlookers were allowed to watch the proceedings from without. That perhaps is what the psalmist had in mind with his reference to his enemies.

The final verse of the psalm extends the image of the host in both depth and time. The one who came as a guest for the meal will now become a tenant, for he will “dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” This is no once-in-a-lifetime feast. The blessings the guest enjoys at the host’s table “will follow me all the days of my life.”

A little girl was asked to quote the Twenty-third Psalm. She started like this: “The LORD is my Shepherd, that’s all I want.” Although she misquoted the first verse, she accurately expressed the meaning of the two images included in this incomparable psalm. Because God is the Shepherd who guides us and the Host who graces us, we have all we want.

THE PROTECTOR WHO GUARDS US

Psalm 121:1-8

God’s people needed more than guidance and gracious provision at the banquet table. They also needed protection. In this Psalm we see another metaphor for God: he is the Protector who guards us. A derivative of the word “guard” appears six times in this psalm. The psalmist used that word to describe what God does for his people.

Why did the psalmist lift up his eyes to “the hills”? Was this a reference to the holy mountains on which some of the significant events in the life of Israel occurred? On the mountain God provided a ram for Abraham so he would not have to sacrifice Isaac (Ge 22). On the mountain God called Moses to be his deliverer (Ex 3). On the mountain God gave the law to his people (Ex 19). On the mountain God demonstrated his omnipotence and affirmed Elijah over the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah (1 Ki 18). Some have interpreted this reference to “the hills” in that way.

Others have suggested that “the hills” is a reference to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple, located on a hill in Jerusalem, was the place where God promised to be present with his people. Thus, the “hills” became synonymous with the city of Jerusalem, the Temple, and particularly with the God who was present with his people (1 Ki 8:33).

This God who is present with his people, the covenant God, is also the God of creation, for this God to whom the psalmist prayed was also “the Maker of heaven and earth” (121:2). Because of the love of God, reflected in his covenant with the people, and because of the power of God, reflected in his creating the world, the psalmist felt confident that this God would be able to provide help.

The psalmist further described God with two phrases: “He will not let your foot slip,” and he will “not slumber” (121:3). The first phrase relates to God’s ability, the second to his attention. The psalmist affirmed there is no limit to what God can do, and there will be no lapse in what God will do. He will not slip, as the pilgrims often did, on the rocks strewn over the pathway to Jerusalem. He will not sleep, as did the fertility gods of Canaan after the vegetation died and the season turned to the fallow time of winter.

What will this creator, covenant God do for his people? The psalmist used two phrases to answer that question. God will watch over his people (121:5-6). The simple sentence, “The LORD is your shade at your right hand” is pregnant with meaning. The right hand is a position of honor, but in this case it is the LORD who is at the psalmist’s right hand. The hot sun of the Middle East could easily cause heatstroke. In such a setting, “shade” carries the fuller meaning of protection. The metaphor is of a sentry who stands by as we sleep to protect us from any outside threat. But, in this instance, it is the LORD himself who stands as our sentry. The psalmist further assures us that this watchcare by our LORD will be provided at all times—day and night (121:6).

God will also keep his people from harm (121:7-8). Note particularly the comprehensiveness of the promise. God will not only protect us from “evil,” but also from all kinds of harm. God will not only protect our “soul,” implying the spiritual realm, but all areas of our lives. Further, God’s protection will cover the whole sphere of our activities (“your coming and going”) and all periods of our lives (“both now and forevermore”). At no time in any experience will any one of us be outside the sphere of God’s protective love. God is a Protector who will guard his people.

CONCLUSION

These metaphors depicting God afford important insights into what God does for his people. God does not provide everything we want, but rather everything we need. As a shepherd provides for the sheep only what will strengthen them, so God will do for his people. God does not isolate us from problems; God insulates us in the midst of our problems.

The realism of the psalmist stands in stark contrast to the health-and-wealth gospel often preached from contemporary pulpits. From the opening story of the Bible, where God gets his hands dirty with creation, God has involved himself with his people in this world. God does not desert us when we need him most; instead, God is “our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1). God does not leave us without the required resources to complete his work; instead, “my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Php 4:19). God’s provisions are not just for the sweet by-and-by; God’s provisions are also for the nasty here-and-now. These pictures of God in these familiar psalms remind us why men and women of faith across the centuries have turned to the Book of Psalms for comfort.