

Sunday May 14
Lesson 11: Sabbath as a Palace in Time
Scripture: Psalm 23

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “The Life of Faith.” In this second lesson of our third unit, “Sabbath,” we focus on how God has created humans to rest and be replenished with the practice of sabbath. Today we will reflect on how we are called to relax in the peace of the sabbath.

Our lesson today comes from the Old Testament in the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms is a book of ancient poetry attributed to writings during the reigns of King David and King Solomon. Psalms were written for the annual national festivals and their celebration of the Lord’s providence in the world and Israel’s destiny.¹ Yet they could also be individual prayers lifted up to God.

Yet the question remains, what is a psalm? With their various compositions and functions, psalms are the poetry on the reign of the Lord and are the praise and proclamation and prayer of those who believe the confession “The Lord reigns.”² As the Lord reigns, truth is declared in the life of the psalmist and God is named as the one who is at the center of the psalmist’s life. When teaching my students about the psalms as a professor, I always invite them to see we are exploring ancient poetry with a twist. These psalms contain both the sacred and the secular.

Like other psalms, the psalm for today’s lesson contains metaphor to help the psalmist name how God acts in their lives. A metaphor used for theological purposes does not describe by comparison, it identifies by equation.³ As a metaphor is not precise, it goes into the imaginative mode to help us understand the experience better.

Psalm 23 begins by naming God as a shepherd. The shepherd was a rich and important role in Israel’s culture. The primary duties of the shepherd’s vocation were provision and protection of the flock.⁴ To name God as a shepherd also declares commitment and trust as sheep followed their shepherd.⁵ God is the one the psalmist trusts and knows and God is the one who leads the psalmist.

The entire psalm points to how God the shepherd provides. The entire body of the psalm completes the sentence “I do not lack...” naming God as the one who supports and cares for

¹ Mays, James L. “Psalms.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

those in God's flock.⁶ Later on, the image of God as a shepherd was one Jesus used in the gospel of John and is known as a major symbol in the Christian faith today.

Application

The phrase "I do not lack..." is such a powerful one. When we name we do not lack anything, we can name we are content and satisfied. We see what is in front of us and we can give thanks to God.

As this connects to sabbath, we can rest because God the good shepherd provides for us, and we do not always have to worry about everything. All throughout the psalm, there are reminders of how God provides for humanity. There are waters to be still besides, moments of renewal for the soul, safety in adversity, a table with food, and the promise of a place in the house of the Lord. God has a place for God's sheep and deeply cares for all.

When I think of sabbath, I see how this pattern plays out for those times when we practice this holy command. As I reread this psalm, I went through my own sabbath and saw evidence of where my God, the great shepherd, leads me to rest and be renewed. I take my dog on a walk and he jumps through puddles with delight; still water brings someone joy! I read God's Word a little slower on my day off, and my soul is rejuvenated. I occasionally get off social media or not check e-mail and I feel my "adversaries" at bay. I feast on food in my pantry, sometimes having a special treat I have saved for Friday. And then I walk or ride on my bike past one of the churches I serve, and I give thanks for the house of worship where I can praise the Lord and give thanks for God's faithfulness.

On other days I go out on a kayak, and on other sabbaths I visit friends to catch up and enjoy life with them. These days are gifts because they remind me of how God has always provided for me, and I do not lack for anything. God has given me everything I need, and the shepherd reminds me of the need to not save the world or overfunction. I can rest and know it is good in the eyes of the Lord.

The more I reflect on God as the good shepherd, I am also struck by how we are invited to name our own humility and limitations. Whether we like it or not, we are not the ones in charge and we cannot know all the things or determine all paths. God is the one who is the shepherd, the one who tends the ways of the world.

Yet there comes a freedom in this fact as it allows us to rest and experience the peace Jesus offers us. As he is the one looking for paths and seeking to defeat wolves, he invites us to enjoy this life and to frolic like lambs in a field resting in God's creation. We were made not to hold the weight of the world and instead leave things up to God. God gives us rest so we might have life abundant, trusting in him for all other things.

We often reserve Psalm 23 for funerals because it speaks of God walking with us through life and then unto death. Yet Psalm 23 is also named as a prescription for today because it reminds us of how we lack nothing. God gives us everything we need including the opportunity to have a sabbath and to rest. As we engage in this rest, God rejuvenates and restores us. We are reminded of how our good shepherd always cares for us and invites us to rest in God's care.

Perhaps the next time you observe your sabbath, start the day by reading Psalm 23 and seeing all the ways God provides for you. Enjoy the day as a gift and see how God the good shepherd has made you to rest. Give thanks for how God carries the weight of the world and you do not.

⁶ Ibid.

How do you see God as a good shepherd in your life? How have you heard Psalm 23 preached or presented? How do you experience God's peace on your sabbath? Why is sabbath tied to an act of providing from God? Why is rest so important to humans and to our walk with God?

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