

The Voice of Encouragement

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It was Shirley, who when I married Bob here at New Brick, filled baskets with fresh flowers at the altar. I loved her dearly, my other mother, and was so desperately afraid I might lose her, but she always hugged me, saying 'Don't worry about me, God's got me!'

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revolving door into the night, I heard a voice – saying, ‘You don’t think I’m going to let you do this alone, do you’, as Shirley came running to meet me.

In our Gospel from John this morning we hear that voice. ‘My sheep know my voice’ Jesus the Good Shepherd says, ‘the voice of encouragement’.

If we look carefully at John’s Gospel, chapter 10, the Good Shepherd, at the passage from the book of Revelation we know so well and say at the celebration of the end of life, at the miracle of new life given to Dorcas/Tabitha in the Book of Acts, all of these words come to us from one primary source – Psalm 23.

Of all the psalms this one is absolutely David’s poem prayer. A poem prayer written as he flees his capital and kingdom for the wilderness. His own son and his closest friend and advisor have betrayed him in an unexpected revolution. And still, David, says the words that three thousand years we continue to say in the midst of disaster and fear and heartbreak: The Lord IS MY Shepherd.

This is a personal prayer, David can and does claim an intimate relationship with Yahweh Jesus. Intimate with the Great I am, the IS. Jesus says it in John's Gospel, 'my sheep know me and I know my sheep'; it is not a casual acquaintance, it is an intimate knowing, as only God can know us. In Hebrew the phrase is Adonai – Roh-I, from the same root as companion, closest friend. David claims his belonging, his owned state, as God's. Sheep belong to their master, the shepherd, they are not on their own.

David goes on to say, 'I shall not want', in modern vernacular, "I need nothing", all is given, all is grace. I don't have to do anything to 'get', I will be given. Because I am His. God will *provide*.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. Did you know that real sheep lie prone when they are secure and sleep. If they smell a threat, if irritated with insects, if hungry, they don't sleep. Only when the place is just right, like Goldilock's bed, can they rest. David asks what we all pray, for ourselves and others, Lord, please, keep us safe. Give me quiet waters, not chaos.

He restoreth my soul – Dorcas, Tabitha received a 'restored soul', a new life, an encouraged spirit,

Tabitha resurrected sprang up like her namesake, a gazelle, not just living, but filled with Life, a new creation. To say, 'restoreth me soul' is to say 'my soul comes back to me'. 'I am myself again.' The good Jew prays every morning, I offer thanks before You, living and eternal King, for you have mercifully restored my soul within me, great is your faithfulness.

There are many Hebrew words to use to talk about paths, but David uses the term that means, 'circle'. The path of rightness is like the labyrinth, we come back to old new places when we walk with God, as Eugene Peterson puts it, 'a long obedience in the same direction'. To be Christ's sheep, we need to grow in knowing Him as deeply as He knows us, we need the path to glorification as His.

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