**Praying the Psalms**

**Sunday July 29, 2018**

**“Amen” (Psalm 23)**

**1. Introduction: *Saying “Amen”***

 “Amen” is how most of us end our prayers, so it’s a suitable way to conclude our reflections on prayer and the Psalms. As we’ve walked through some of the Psalms, we’ve discovered that the prayers of God’s people can come in different forms. The Psalms, the prayer book of Jews and Christians, includes *praise* (Ps 8), *thanksgiving* (Ps 40), *confession* (Ps 51) and *requests for help* (Ps 43). So, whether we’re saying, *wow, thanks, sorry, or help* to God, all our prayers end the same, with an *amen.* “Amen” is a Hebrew word “meaning *certainty*, *truthfulness*, and *faithfulness*. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament use it as a liturgical response at the end of Psalms and doxologies in which the congregation affirms what has been prayed for by saying Amen. ‘*So be it*.” (*Harper’s Bible Dictionary*). So, when we say *Amen* at the end of our prayer we are expressing our *hope* for its fulfillment. We’re saying to God “So be it.” Yet, this bold declaration, *so be it,* does not spring from our own spiritual prowess; rather, it is grounded in the certainty, truthfulness, and faithfulness of God. We are broken, hopeless, small-in-faith people, lifting up our joy, hope, frustration, gratitude, fear, anxiety, and shame, saying to God, *amen, so be it.*

Yet, where does this quiet confidence to pray and say “*amen”* come from? It is grounded in the certainty, truthfulness, and faithfulness of God. One of the hang-ups that people have with prayer comes from their impression of God. Some see God as a galactic cop who’s out to get you whenever you slip up. Other see God as some sort of *higher power* that is not really interested or involved in their lives. Jesus used the word *Father* to describe God and this is a beautiful image. Yet some people had fathers who were not loving, caring or nurturing. Jesus said, “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him*!” (Matthew 7:9-11). God is the superlative father, who exceeds our earthly fathers in every way imaginable. So our prayers are directed to our Father in heaven, who is *good* and wants to give *good gifts* to his children.

 When we look into the Bible, we discover all sorts of pictures of God. Beautiful metaphors that vividly portray God’s character and deeds, helping us finite creatures to comprehend the unfathomable mystery of God. One such metaphor is *the shepherd* and the most well known passage that uses this picture for God is the 23rd Psalm. Whenever we quiet our hearts, read, and reflect on this beloved Psalm, we are filled with a renewed trust and confidence in the Good Shepherd who guides, protects and provides for us. It is to this Good Shepherd that we pray, saying *amen, so be it.*

**1. The Lord is My Shepherd: *I lack nothing***

The Psalm begins with these memorable words, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Even though sheep, pastures and shepherds are not part of our everyday experience, this image continues to resonate with us. The simplicity and intimacy of this picture of God speak deeply to us. We can close our eyes and almost picture a green hillside covered with flocks of sheep and the gentle shepherd watching over them, protecting them from danger and guiding them to lush pastures and refreshing waters. The metaphor of shepherd and sheep paints a vivid picture of the relationship between God and his people. It is a relationship that is defined by the shepherd’s care for the sheep and the sheep’s reliance upon the shepherd. The Lord is our shepherd and we are his sheep.

 Our Lord, our Shepherd, generously *provides* for the needs of his sheep as he *guides* the flock to good pastures and safe water. He makes us to lie down in green pastures and leads us beside the still waters (Ps 23:2), giving us plenty of grass to eat and lots of water to drink. It’s everything that sheep could ever want or need. So, the Psalmist declares, “*I lack nothing*” (Ps 23:1). This is quite the statement for the Psalmist to make! He affirms that when the Lord is our Shepherd *we shall not want*. This confident declaration can also be found in the words of the hymn, “Great is Thy Faithfulness.”

“All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
    “Great is Thy faithfulness,” Lord, unto me!”

The apostle Paul also expressed his profound reliance on God in his words to the Philippian Christians:

“How I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again. I know you have always been concerned for me, but you didn’t have the chance to help me. Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. *For I can do everything through Christ,who gives me strength*” (Philippians 4:10-13).

 Our Lord, our Shepherd supplies all our needs and whenever we get weary, worn out and exhausted from the journey of life, “*He renews my strength*” or as another translation puts it, “*he restores my soul*” (Ps 23:3). The life of the sheep is not always easy and comfortable; danger is always present. There are times when the pasture is sparse, the water is limited or the risk of predators is imminent. Amidst these times of difficulty, the protective, attentive shepherd transforms the situation of danger and, in so doing, he gives life to his sheep. At the same time, the words, *he restores my soul,* can also speak of the spiritual renewal that the Lord brings into the lives of his people. As we face the many spiritual challenges of everyday life in the world, the Good Shepherd renews our souls.

 “*The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing*.” These are easy words to recite in the abstract, but the true test is living them out in the real world. The focus of these opening verses has been on the shepherd’s role, so it’s easy to forget that the sheep have a part to play as well. The sheep are completely dependent on the shepherd so they must *trust* him fully. In the same way, we need to *trust* our Good Shepherd fully. So whether it’s our family, finances, career, health or our church, we can rely on the Good Shepherd to care for us because he is everything we need. And what peace is ours when we cease our frantic, anxiety filled lives and rest in the arms of the Good Shepherd. Then, we can take a deep breath, pray, and say, *amen, so be it.*

**2. Travelling Mercies: *He guides me along the right paths***

 Being sheep in the flock of the Good Shepherd also means that we must be willing to *follow* him where he leads us. Commenting on this Psalm, John Calvin wrote that the sheep in God’s flock are those “who willingly abide in his sheepfold and surrender themselves to be governed by him” (Brueggemann, *Psalms,* p. 122). In order to follow the Good Shepherd the sheep must exercise trust in him and recognize his voice when he calls. When Jesus taught about the Good Shepherd, he said, “He (the shepherd) calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and *his sheep follow him because they know his voice*” (John 10:3-4).

 Our Lord, our Shepherd guides us along the *right paths* (Ps 23:3). But those right paths are not without their difficulties; real danger exists even on the pathway where the Good Shepherd leads. The Psalmist writes, “Even when I walk through the *darkest valley*, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me” (Ps 23:4). As the sheep make their perilous trek through the narrow ravines and the gloomy valleys, they aren’t fearful, because the Good Shepherd is *with them.* The idyllic green pastures and the quiet waters aren’t the only place where the Shepherd leads the sheep. The Psalmist’s trust in God was borne out of real life experiences. It is in those darkest valleys where we learn to *trust* the Good Shepherd; where we learn to place our lives completely in his hands.

 After the terrible events of this week, we don’t feel as safe as we once did in our city. Collectively, we are walking through a dark valley as the realities of violence are shattering our security. When even enjoying a coffee or an ice cream in Greek town is no longer considered a safe activity. I wish I had some wise words to ease our fears and to make the darkness go away. Perhaps the best thing that I can say is the Good Shepherd is with us and even in darkest of valleys we need not be cowering in fear. The Good Shepherd is with us and he protects us. He swings his club to ward off the wild animals that threaten us; he gently wields his shepherd’s staff to keep his sheep from wandering toward danger (Ps 23:4).

 Tomorrow Sherri and I are departing for a vacation to Greece for two weeks. Travelling always gives me a set of mixed emotions. On the one hand I’m excited about all the things I’m going to experience, but I’m also anxious about all the travel-related glitches that could emerge. This week I read these very helpful words in Anne Lamott’s book on prayer, “Once when I was about to fly to the other side of the world and asked my church for prayers, my pastor said, ‘By the time you get on a plane, it’s too late for beggy prayers. It’s time for *trust* and *surrender’*” (*Help, Thanks, Wow,* p. 55). *It’s time for trust* and *surrender!* I’ll remember that tomorrow as I stand in line at the airport and go through security checkpoints. I’ll remember that when the plane takes off and lands. I’ll remember that as I experience all the potential perils of travelling abroad. But I’ll also remember that when I’m watching the sunset glowing on the ocean. *Trust* and *surrender.*

 Life is a lot like travelling. We wake up every morning thankful for another day, but soon the stuff of life comes crashing in on us and we feel overwhelmed. In green pastures or dark valleys, know that the Good Shepherd is with you. Trust and surrender. Take a deep breath, pray, and say, *amen, so be it.*

**3. At the Lord’s Table: *You prepare a table***

 At the end of our journey, through green pastures and dark valleys, the Lord provides a sumptuous feast for us (Ps 23:5). He holds a banquet in our honour and feeds us a six-course meal. Even though danger still lurks in the shadows, the Lord prepares the feast in hostile territory, “in the presence of my enemies.” Before the meal, our Gracious Host anoints us with oil, healing the wounds that we’ve acquired from our dangerous travels. He fills our cup to the brim, symbolizing his bountiful blessings. And as I sit back and enjoy the meal, I feel like I’ve finally come home, feasting in the house of the Lord and enjoying his presence. Then, as I reflect on the journey, where I thought that it was the enemy chasing me down, I realize that it was God’s *goodness* and *unfailing love* that were pursuing me all the days of my life (Ps 23:6). At that moment, I take a deep breath, pray, and say, *amen, so be it.*

