



Psalm 23

Aboriginal Sunday

Sermon – Aiden Sibrava - 23 January 2022

Introduction

Today is Aboriginal Sunday, first celebrated in 1941 through a partnership between Aboriginal leaders, particularly William Cooper, and the leadership of St. Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney. The current Dean of St. Andrew's, Sandy Grant, former rector of Wollongong Anglican Cathedral, commends this day to us as a day when we might mourn for past injustice and pray for First Australians and for the spread of the gospel among the original custodians of Australia. So that's what today is about.

For that reason, as we look at the 23rd Psalm today, we're going to think about what it means for First Australians, and for all Australians. And that's not intended to create division, but rather to acknowledge that God's word speaks into pain and into dispossession. And, of course, you know that (if you know your Bible) because so much of Israel's history was a history of hurt and dispossession...of captivity in Egypt, of Exodus, and Exile. The Jewish experience and anticipation of God's deliverance speaks deeply to First Australians—and indeed to all who've ever felt dispossessed.

So let's turn now to the text and what it tells us about God.

Provision, guidance, goodness (1-3)

First of all, we learn that God is a God of provision, guidance and goodness. Look at those first few verses.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

They're beautiful verses. The writer says that, *if I am like a dumb sheep, God is like a wise, attentive shepherd.* And he's not just some day-hire shepherd. *He's a good shepherd and I lack nothing.*

I don't know if you've spent a lot of time around sheep, but they're needy creatures. They need a lot of maintaining, a lot of protecting. In fact young lambs are so vulnerable that the crows will often come and peck their eyes. And foxes lurk and kill for sport—not just for food. In Gunnedah, I knew a sheep farmer who, every time he killed ten foxes or so, would buy a new rifle if he needed one...because the lambs are worth a lot and they're lousy at looking after themselves.

Sheep are needy creatures but God is a good shepherd. And in the language of metaphor, the Psalmist is saying that we are like the sheep. But we're lucky sheep, because our shepherd is lavish in his care for us. He guides us to green fields. He leads us to gently flowing streams of sweet, fresh water. When we're depleted, he restores. The Psalmist says that 'He restores my soul.' It's really interesting, the Hebrew term for 'soul' is Nephesh - it's like, 'the breath that fills my lungs,' the breath of life. Do you ever feel flat, out of breath? Squeezed, depleted? The Psalmist says that God restores, renews, refreshes. He is a good shepherd, a kind God.

But... is it offensive to be compared to a sheep? I mean it might not be offensive to you if you haven't spent a lot of time around sheep. But if you have, you know that... sheep are dumb. Like, if you put your foot out in front of a moving herd, the sheep in front will jump over it. And when you take it away, the sheep behind will still jump. And on top of that, sheep are a pain. I mean, they're a massive hassle. We know so many farmers in the Northwest who've got out of

sheep, because they're too much work. Instead they've gone for cattle or crops. So the comparison *is* a little offensive, if you know about sheep.

Unless you've been there. If you've been caught out, come to the end of yourself and found yourself without the wit or the resources or the energy or the knowledge to know what to do... And in that moment, knowing that God *is* a wise shepherd, even if we *are* dumb sheep - well, it's a comfort. You know, when you're young, you think that grownups have it all together; they've got life figured out. But then when you're grown up, you realise... we're all just repeating catch phrases and trying to learn from our mistakes. And I'm not even sure that those who are at the top ever *really* feel like they know what they're doing. We just turn up, have a go, and people seem to be OK with that, so, that'll do, I guess.

But God is our wise shepherd. He *does* know what he's doing. And that's a massive comfort.

So what does that mean for first Australians?

Well it means that in the face of loss and pain and destruction of identity, you don't have to have all the answers. Just imagine, the sense that... the ancestors *knew* what it meant to be Wodi Wodi. They knew the animals and plants and fish that were entrusted to their care. They knew when to burn; they knew the dances and the songlines... And then... it's gone. So much of it is gone. And you have to figure out what it means to *be* in this new world that's been imposed upon you. The pain must be immense. Identity, the thing that anchors us, is *right there*—in every stone and tree and shell—and yet at the same time it's somehow out of reach. And you have to rebuild, sometimes from the ground up.

God is a God who restores depleted souls. I don't know what that means for every individual and I wouldn't pretend for a second to know what that might mean for First Australians, but I can point you in the direction the Psalmist points us - to a God who is kind and good, a God who can meet us in restoral, in renewal.

And what does it mean for all of us?

Well it means that you're not alone in the world. And, when you come to the end of yourself, you haven't failed and you're not discarded. Because God is our good shepherd - even in the moments when we feel like stupid sheep... *especially* in the moments when we feel like stupid sheep.

The darkest valley (4)

Of course, there's one moment that humbles all of us. In life, we might have moments where we're humbled... where we come to the end of ourselves... but it's only ever an anticipation of that great and final moment of humility or, for some, humiliation. In the fourth verse of this Psalm, the writer writes:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley (the beautiful old translations say, the valley of the shadow of death), I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Verse 4 speaks of a steep valley, a deep gorge: in fact, the darkest valley: the valley of the shadow of death. And did you notice how the Psalmist described their experience of this dark valley? They don't turn away from it. They don't avoid it. They don't go around it. They pass *through* it. And the truth is that when it comes to the darkest valley... *everyone* will go through it. We may avoid it for a time. We may hail it over yonder as a faroff path, a 'one day' journey,

not today... But if anything is true, it's true that all will die. I will, and so will you.

And yet... what is the experience of the Psalmist, as they traverse this dark valley? The death valley? Well it's in verse 4, they say...

I will fear no evil! For you, God, my shepherd, you are with me: your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You see, God is there. And he's a good shepherd. A wise shepherd. A well-armed shepherd. I told you about my friend at Gunnedah who has his set of rifles to protect his flock from crows and foxes... But here we see the imagery of **God** as shepherd - the good, powerful shepherd, staff in the one hand to catch and guide a wandering sheep and, in his other hand, a rod to belt the life out of any robber or wolf who gets too close.

It's a striking image. The poetry of this psalm is beautiful. The valley of the shadow of death is the valley of *tsal-maw'-veth*, the death-shadow. As if a normal valley isn't bad enough with its towering sides offering nothing but the threat of ambush... And yet even in the death-gorge, this symbol of Sheol itself's unwelcome incursion into all our lives... God is there... near to the one who rests in him.

So what does that mean for first Australians?

It means that God is near, and strong, and wise. It means that he is near to those who call on him, even in their darkest hours. And if they are harmed, or abused, or hurt, he is present as a warrior and an avenger. The Prophet Jeremiah said,

The LORD is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They

will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten.¹

Let any man who would harm man be warned - God is an avenger. He is not far from those who call on his Name. Our Aboriginal brothers and sisters have a King who is greater than all and who will call all to account. May those who trust in him be comforted; and those who would treat them as less than children of God be warned.

Indeed, let all of us be comforted:

God is with us in the dark place. Even when we walk through the most treacherous valley. As Christ says, "do not fear, little flock." For God is with us.

And for those who cast themselves upon his mercy, letting go of earthly treasures and forsaking sin... we are told they will be counted friends of God. Christ even goes so far as to say they will have treasure in heaven (Luke 12).

Vindication, blessing (5-6)

Which of course leads us on to the last verses of Psalm 23, which speak of vindication, and blessing:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

What a beautiful picture of friendship with God! Those who will trust in God are secure: what a picture of confidence, it's almost smug! The imagery of sitting down to picnic while your enemies watch on. Powerless, impotent, weak compared to the God who goes with us.

¹ Jeremiah 20:11

Now, you're all good people, so I know none of you ever got into fights in school. But... for any kids who *did* fight, you will know - there's always that *one* fight where you learn something. Your timing's lousy - you get into it with another student over something or other and then... a parent shows up. *Their* parent. And in that moment, it doesn't matter how righteous your cause was, or how much they pressed your buttons... You back down *real quick*. That's the picture the Psalmist paints of friendship with God. The enemies of God's people are reduced to jealous, bitter, powerless, petty schoolkids; because of who *our* heavenly Father is.

And we enjoy the blessed life - the picnic, blessing and anointing, goodness and love, and even the thought that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever! Oh, what a comfort!

Looking forward, looking back

But, you know, as much as this Psalm speaks comfort and hope to First Australians and indeed to all of us, there is a deeper reality still. Because what does all of this mean for God?

In the Psalm, God is Shepherd and Father, the powerful one who goes ahead of us and beside us. But it's worth asking: what is God's experience of that valley? What does it mean for him to walk it beside us?

Well we don't have to wonder because God *has* walked through that valley in history. Not only beside us, but ahead of us... and *for* us. Because Jesus walked the valley, didn't he? He walked the valley of the shadow of death—all the way into its darkest reaches... into deepest darkness. There wasn't a darker day than the afternoon at Golgotha where the midday sun refused to shine for shame, as Christ gave up his life upon the cross of calvary.

But he did it for us. To secure the promises of Psalm 23 for us -

the promise of friendship with God, that rests upon forgiveness and the restoration of relationship; you could call it reconciliation. Christ walked the darkest valley for us, to secure reconciliation, so that all these blessings would be ours.

And not only did he walk into the valley; he kept on walking. To show us that there is a way through, and out... a way, in him. He *is* the way, the truth and the life. It's not always a well-walked track, but there is a path leading out of the dark valley and it's the Jesus track. The Jesus way.

So what does that mean for all of us on Aboriginal Sunday?

Well I think it's a reminder of our cross-shaped reality; as Christians. Jesus reaches into the past - the promises of Israel, the hope of God's people. And in every one of our pasts, he takes a hold of sin and shame, bringing it to the cross. And at the same time, he reaches into the future: bringing heaven into the 'now,' as the renewal of creation begins with the renewing of our hearts. And all God's promises find their 'yes' and 'amen' in him.

And so today, as we see the beautiful promises of God reflected in Psalm 23, let us look to Jesus, the object and fulfilment of God's promises for all - for First Australians, for all Australians, and indeed for all who will look to him.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. And even when I go through the darkest valley, The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*² Nobody! In him we need fear *nobody*.

So take heart, and be reconciled to God and to one another, in Christ.
Amen.

² Psalm 27:1