

BWV 112 “Der Herr ist Mein Getreuer Hirt”

Psalm 23

(Address to accompany the performance of J.S. Bach BWV 112)

“The Lord is my shepherd.” That may sound like boasting, but I’m really boasting about him, not me. “You didn’t choose me,” Jesus said, “but I chose you.” The Lord found me and made me his own, branding me with his mark of ownership – the sign of his cross upon my forehead and over my heart. He named me and claimed me. I am a sheep of his pasture, and he is my shepherd.

“The Lord is my shepherd, so I lack nothing.” I’m not the wealthiest sheep in the pasture, nor the wisest, nor the healthiest or even the happiest all the time. But I lack nothing. I have God’s kingdom and his righteousness; an eternal inheritance that no one can take from me. I have all that I need to support my body and life. I have his word, his forgiveness, his peace, his life. Having that, what more do I need?

And yet, my Shepherd gives me more. “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” I don’t know about you, but I find it difficult to relax much of the time. And so my Shepherd has to make me lie down. Sometimes I get distracted by attractive weeds, so my Shepherd pokes and prods me back to the green pastures of his word and sacrament, and to the fellowship of his flock.

“He leads me beside quiet waters.” Sheep have a tendency to drink from any polluted puddle they come across, and I’m no different. My Good Shepherd knows, however, that I need fresh, clean water. “Whoever drinks the water I give them,” Jesus says, “will never thirst.” This is the quiet waters of holy Baptism, and the reflective waters of his Spirit-filled word.

Through these refreshing waters my Shepherd “restores my soul.” He gives me life – and hope – again. The sin that stains my soul he washes clean, and the evil that I suffer at the hands of others, he enables me to let go of and forgive. And so each and every day my soul is restored in his grace, refreshed, forgiven, so that I may be his instrument of forgiveness and restoration for others.

“He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Like most people I like to wander on my own path, to do things “my way”. It’s exciting for a while but then I get lost and can’t find my way back. And so my Shepherd gently guides me back to his paths – “ruts of righteousness” he calls them. These are the well-worn paths of the righteous faithful who have gone before me – the fathers and mothers in the faith, the saints and martyrs down through the ages. He guides me on these paths not for my sake but for his name’s sake – the name that I bear in holy Baptism, the name that is his real presence and power to save.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” “We’re “not busy being born we’re busy dying” Bob Dylan once sang. The apostle Paul puts it this way: “We face death all day long...we are as sheep led to the slaughter.” Death and suffering is the lot of us all in this fallen world, and yet, we need not fear and I will not fear, because my Shepherd is with me and I know that he will never let me go. Nothing can separate me from his love.

And so, “His rod and his staff will comfort me.” With the rod of his law my Shepherd disciplines me, and with the staff of his gospel he consoles me. His rod protects me from myself, from my destructive ways, my wanderings. His staff assures me of his presence, comforting me, constantly nudging me back on the right road.

Furthermore, my Shepherd “prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” This is the table he prepares for me here, week after week: “Take eat,” he says. “This is my body. Take and drink. This is my blood.” It is a table of rich food and fine wines, a foretaste of the feast awaiting me in the heavenly kingdom. He prepares this table for me in the very presence of my enemies – sin, death, the devil. Those hungry wolves cannot touch me at his table.

“He anoints my head with oil.” My Shepherd knows my wounds and my open sores, the places where I have hurt myself and where others have hurt me. He pours on his healing balm right where it’s needed. He gives me his Holy Spirit and anoints me with the oil of gladness, so that I can truly say, “My cups run over.” He gives and gives, and there is no end to his giving.

And I still haven’t told you about his sheep dogs yet: “Goodness” and “Mercy”. They “follow me all the days of my life”, nipping at my heels, barking at me, keeping my Shepherd’s flock together. His goodness and mercy are wonderfully persistent. They never let me out of their sight. Even when I can’t see my Shepherd, I know that he is near, because his goodness and mercy are always with me, always protecting me.

I don’t know all that the future holds for me, but of one thing I’m certain: “I will live in my Shepherd’s house forever.” For this is Jesus’ promise: “My sheep hear my voice,” he says. “I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”

What a wonderfully good Shepherd we have! What blessed sheep we are! In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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