"The Lord is my shepherd." This is one of the most recognizable quotes in all of sacred writ. But why? What is it about being a shepherd that makes us have such respect for the Lord? It is true that he came from a very agriculturally based society, but we do not, so why does the image persist?

The modern reader of the Old Testament misses a lot because we do not understand the nature of the agricultural messages that were so easily understood by its original recipients. Back then everyone knew what happened in a wine press. Everyone understood what it meant to be a shepherd or a watchman on the wall. These were all part of their everyday lives. Now we have to be educated about such things, because we are lucky if we know the difference between lamb and mutton. And for those of you who do not know the difference, lamb is the meat from a baby sheep, and mutton is the meat from an older sheep. Lamb is tender and tasty, but mutton is tougher and has a much stronger flavor, so is less desirable for most people. Just thought I would throw that in the pot. <grin>

Here is the text from Psalm 23. A psalm is a song. King David is famous for the songs he wrote and sang about the Lord and how the Lord was his (our) protector. This is probably the most famous of all the psalms David wrote.

> 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

A shepherd is a protector of a flock. To be among the Lord's flock means that he is your personal guardian. It is his life on the line to see to it that you are safe from harm, that you are cared for, and that you grow up healthy and strong. To say that I "shall not want" means that I will lack for nothing. He will provide for my every need.

Though this verse is just a single sentence, it speaks volumes about David's view of the Lord. It expresses his confidence that with the Lord as his shepherd he has no worries, no fears. All arguments are settled by this statement. It is a vote of total confidence in his shepherd and in his protector's ability to care for him.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

One of the many responsibilities of the shepherd was to get the sheep to green pastures so they could eat. In an arid country like Judea, one often had to go to high country. In the high country there was grass, fresh water, and predators. David tells us that because of his shepherd those in the flock can rest in peace, without fear. They can lie down in the midst of plenty, even though there are predators around. There is water to drink to quench their thirst, and not from dangerous rivers or fast flowing streams that could sweep them away, but from calm pools of water, void of danger.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

We often do not understand why the Lord does what he does. He will sometimes tell us that it is for his own sake or his own glory or some other reason that he does what he does. We have learned to just say, okay to those times, because we don't always know why the Lord acts in certain ways. We know that by allowing the Lord to lead us in the paths of righteousness it is for our benefit, but how that benefits him I can only assume it is because he loves us so much and wants what is best for us. Being lead in the paths of righteous living is restorative. It is healing. This is how he restores our souls. The Savior taught that we were to be perfect, even as He is perfect. To be perfect is to be made whole, completely whole. What better way to be made whole than to live lives of righteousness?

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

What a frightening image - to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. To be in such a dark and gloomy place, with death at your every turn. Yet he says that even though he might be led through such a terrifying place, he will fear no evil. Why? Because his shepherd, Christ, is with him. The instrument of a shepherd's protection is his rod or staff. He uses this for walking, as well as for defending the flock. Seeing that his shepherd is always armed with protection for him, and having complete confidence in his shepherd's ability to save him from harm, he can walk even under the shadow of death itself, and fear no evil.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

I can only guess at the symbolism of this statement- to have a meal prepared for you in the presence of your enemies. Globally, eating together is a very intimate act. It is not something that is normally done with enemies, at least not comfortably. Yet David speaks with confidence that his God prepares food for him even in the presence of his enemies. He is cared for under all circumstances.

Anointing one's head with oil is not something we do in our culture, but it was done in David's day as a way to prepare to go out, like we would get ready for an important event.

The cup in biblical references means many things. When your cup runneth over it refers not to having more than just enough, but more than you could possible keep. Like asking for a cup of wine and having the steward pour your cup, but then keep pouring until it was spilling out onto the ground. It denotes excess, and abundance.

> 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

What a wonderful statement of gratitude, confidence, and love, an expression of appreciation and acknowledgment for his God, to say that because he is part of Christ's flock, those he protects and cares for, goodness and mercy will follow or be with him all the days of his life. And when this life is over he has every confidence that he will dwell in God's house forever.

Final Thoughts

To answer my original question about why this image of the shepherd persists, here is my answer. I believe we still have this image in our heads, because Christ has made us shepherds over his people. We have responsibilities through our callings in the Church to guard and protect one another, to lead each other in safe paths, to restore each other's souls whenever we can. We are learning to be under shepherds to the Good Shepherd. He has told us to be like him, and caring for his other children, our brothers and sisters, is how we do it. This is ministering in a nutshell.

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