

Acts 9:36–43

Ps. 23

Rev. 7:9–17

John 10:22–30

I Shall Not Want

Goal for the Session

After reflecting on God as shepherd and host, adults will explore implications of following, trusting, and dwelling in God.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Psalm 23

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective,” David L. Petersen

Different though the two primary metaphors are (God as shepherd and God as host), they share one element: God providing nurture, especially to those in distress. To be near God is to be fed. Both Judaism and Christianity have recognized the importance of such divinely provided food. Jews celebrate the meal of Passover, whereas Christians experience the ultimate communal meal of the Eucharist.

WHERE is God in these words?

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Psalm 23 has long provided a powerful witness in the worship of the Christian funeral. In death’s shadow and darkness, Christ accompanies us. Into the hell of God-forsakenness he descended, so that even when we make our beds in hell, we will not be without him. As the messenger at the empty tomb announced, “He is going ahead of you” (Mark 16:7), not only to prepare a dwelling place for us at the end of life, but also to prepare a table in the midst of life, with all its joys and sorrows, its hopes and fears. Christ has promised to remain with us as the good shepherd even to the end of time, so that in life and in death we can say with confidence and trust: “The LORD is my shepherd.”

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective,” Catherine L. Kelsey

Psalm 23 is the most familiar of the many psalms that reassure us of God’s continuing presence, no matter what is happening to our bodies, our relationships, our community, or our world. It is easy in the midst of trauma to give our confidence over to doctors or leaders as if they hold everything in their hands. They do not. Psalm 23 helps us retain perspective in the midst of trauma, perspective that retains our agency in relation to those who intend to help us. Psalm 23 helps restore us to our selves; we are active as ones who trust in God. Through it all, God and God alone is our true safety, our true shepherd.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective,” William F. Brosend

We keep faith with Psalm 23 if we remain present and personal, but this does not mean ignoring the last, luminous line: “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.” What God has done for the psalmist is what the psalmist trusts God will continue to do. A sermon that invites the listener to share such trust, a sermon that is personal and present, responds well to the daunting task of preaching a text as familiar as Psalm 23.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Psalm 23

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- pens
- paper
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource
Sheets 1 and 2
- copies of Resource
Sheet 1 for May 19,
2019
- Internet-connected
device

For Responding

- option 1: pens and paper, board or newsprint
- option 2: pens and paper
- option 3: pens, paper, and markers of many colors

The shepherd's implements—staff and iron-tipped rod—were used for guiding the sheep and driving predators away. Both were necessary in the rocky terrain of Syria and Palestine where safe paths were not easy to follow and where wolves, jackals, and lions were threats.

Focus on Your Teaching

People today may have scant experience with shepherds. But all know about caring and nurturing, protection and guidance. All know about hosts who set a banquet before us and about plentiful cups brimming over. These experiences are pleasant. But not all memories related to today's psalm will be pleasant—some members will associate the psalm with death, funerals, and suffering. Be sensitive to the varied emotions that today's lesson may evoke. What will be joyful comfort for one member may be a sad reminder for another.

Lord Jesus, I lift to you now the names of all those whom I teach (name them one by one). Give me understanding so that I may share their sorrows as well as their joys. Amen.

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, if you choose option 1 in Responding, print on a board or newsprint the sentences for completion given in the activity.

Greet individuals warmly by name. When all have gathered, have participants think of a time when they were invited to a big dinner or party. Have each participant describe that situation to a partner and identify the ways their host showed hospitality to the guests.

Indicate that today we will be reflecting on God as gracious host as well as caring shepherd and what that may mean for our lives. Pray:

O God, assure us of your presence, guidance, and providence at all times—when things are going well and also when we are most vulnerable. In Jesus' name. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have participants read Psalm 23 silently and identify phrases or words that have particular meaning for them. Invite them to discuss the phrases or words with a partner. For some the psalm will have joyful connotations; for others it may evoke memories of grief.

Now have participants examine the psalm to figure out where and how the two major metaphors for God are highlighted (shepherd, vv. 1–4, and host, vv. 5–6). Indicate that originally the Old Testament image of God as shepherd referred to God's relationship with the covenant people. But here it is a personal relationship with the individual who has a childlike trust and a great sense of God's blessings, presence, and guidance. The image of host indicates God's steadfast goodness, including hospitality and refuge—abundant blessings, even when enemies are near.

Anointing was a symbolic act that set aside a person for a specific leadership function—such as priest, prophet, or king—in the community. The psalmist has been anointed—chosen and set apart, treated royally—by God.

Ask how the two images for God, as shepherd and host, complement each other. Some participants may previously have thought of the psalm primarily in terms of the shepherd image. Encourage them to spend time on the host image also. Have them identify the blessings (what God does) related to both images in the psalm, while a volunteer writes them on the board or newsprint. Then have members of the group call out contemporary equivalents to those blessings and write them also. (Keep the list for later.)

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Psalm 23) and have a volunteer read aloud the “What?” excerpt. Ask: How does the author’s link to the communal meal of the Eucharist enrich the understanding of nurture in the psalm?

Then have a volunteer read aloud the “Where?” excerpt. Explain that scholars believe that Psalm 23 probably arose from the psalmist’s experience in worship, not a funeral. Ask: Why do many find Psalm 23 to be a helpful psalm at funerals?

Have a volunteer read aloud John 10:11–15. Ask: How does this passage add to our understanding of God as shepherd? In what way is this the ultimate act of caring?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (God’s Goodness). Read the page silently or have a volunteer read it aloud. Discuss Calvin’s understanding of God’s initiative in the light of the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. Ask: If God always takes the initiative, are there implications for how we follow and trust God?

Now make three headings on the board or newsprint—“shepherd,” “host,” “overflowing cup.” Have participants brainstorm two or three modern metaphors instead of “shepherd,” then two or three instead of “host,” and finally two or three for “overflowing cup.” (Today, an overflowing cup calls for a paper towel! Encourage new metaphors that convey super-abundant blessings.) List the metaphors in the three columns on the board or newsprint.

Distribute pens and paper. Have participants work alone or in small groups and write a version of Psalm 23 using some of the new metaphors. Participants may wish to include some of the contemporary blessings listed earlier in the session. These contemporary versions of the psalm may be used in Closing.

Finish by reading together the “So What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Ask: What might it mean to say that God is the shepherd and host of our own congregation? (If you choose option 2 in Responding, omit this discussion and move directly into that activity.)

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. The Christian Life** Tell participants: Now that we have spent time reflecting on God as shepherd and host, we will consider implications in our own lives of following God the shepherd and trusting in God the host who provides our needs.

**EASY
PREP**

Provide pens and paper and have participants finish the following sentences written on the board or newsprint prior to class:

- ❧ For me, following the Good Shepherd means . . .
- ❧ For me, trusting the Good Host means . . .
- ❧ For me, dwelling in God's house forever means . . .

When everyone has finished, discuss the responses in small groups or as one large group. Encourage participants to listen carefully to others' insights, which may enrich their own relationship with God.

2. The Church in the Psalm Read Psalm 23 in a new way. Substitute "the church," "our congregation," or "our" for "I," "me," and "my" throughout.

Discuss how God is shepherd and host in the church today. How has God provided for and led your church? How has it been comforted in "the darkest valley"? How has it experienced God's goodness and mercy in the last year? How does God's protection and nurture call the church/your congregation to follow, trust, and dwell in God?

Distribute pens and paper. Have participants write prayers of thanksgiving for God's nurture of your church and/or prayers of intercession for the church as it seeks to follow and to trust in God. The prayers may be used in Closing.

3. Exploring Faith through Simple Art Provide pens, paper, and markers. Ask each member of the group to think of one or more colors or shapes to represent the image of God as shepherd, and then do the same for the image of God as host. Then ask them to think of a color and/or shape that inspires them to follow God. Do the same for trust in God, and then for dwelling in God.

Now have each participant use markers to create a drawing, diagram, or other artwork, using the colors and/or shapes they have selected to depict their relationship to God.

Show their work to the group and let them comment on it as they wish. Encourage participants to take their work home and to use it as a focus for their daily devotions in the coming week.

CLOSING

Read one or more of participants' contemporary versions of the psalm from Exploring. Option: If you can access YouTube, play John Rutter's "The Lord's My Shepherd." Search www.youtube.com for the author and title of song.

If you did option 2 in Responding, invite participants to pray their prayers now. If not, pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Gracious Host, you provide for our needs so that we can say with the psalmist, "I shall not want." Give us faith to follow you and to rejoice in your generosity and protection all our lives. Let us dwell in your house forever. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 19, 2019, or e-mail it to the participants.

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God's Goodness



Of particular importance is the image in verse 6 of YHWH's goodness and mercy pursuing the poet throughout his life, not waiting for him to seek or call. John Calvin saw in verse 6 an expression of God's prevenient grace, which anticipates our unwillingness to turn to God and yet, like the "hound of heaven," follows steadily, tirelessly after us and brings us home (cf. Luke 15:5). At stake theologically in this image is the conviction that even faith is a gift—the fruit of God's grace at work in us—not an accomplishment for which we can take credit. We are justified *by* the gift of grace *through* the gift of faith. Both prepositions express God's faithfulness in and for us and are crucial to the way we understand the doctrine of justification.

What might it do to our understanding of God, and to the way we live with life's joys and sorrows, if we took seriously that God always takes the initiative with us—a shepherd leading us toward himself, following us in our wanderings so that we never get beyond the love that will not let us go?

Excerpted from John B. Rogers, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 434.