

“WHAT DAVID DIDN’T SAY”

A Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 17, 2016

Text: Psalm 23 / John 10:22-30

What David didn’t say in Psalm 23 is significant. David was a man of war; it would be easy for us to imagine him writing a very different statement of faith. For example, if David had been a follower of a god like the Roman Mars or the Greek Ares, he would never have written anything like Psalm 23.

What David didn’t say in Psalm 23 is also significant because David was a successful person. He rose as high as a person could rise, in his time and place. People who reach the top in worldly terms generally do not leave behind a testimonial like this. Other people have led great armies, made great fortunes and great discoveries and led wonderful lives without subscribing to anything like Psalm 23.

I would like to pick apart Psalm 23 by looking at what David might have said, but didn’t. I hope it will help you see that Psalm 23 expresses the faith of Jesus, as well as the faith we have in Jesus.

So, let’s look at what David didn’t say.

1. David did not promise God anything. Most gods require their adherents to make promises or vows. The Roman god Mars was typical of the gods of many places. Throughout the Roman empire, local deities were identified with Roman Mars. People were not surprised by what they learned about Mars from the Romans. They knew what it is like to have a “god” of war. Strong men throughout the empire, especially soldiers and gladiators, would pledge themselves to their god. They would make great promises about what they would do for their god. They would try very hard to please Mars (or the local counterpart—from now on, let me just say “Mars”) so they could enlist the support of Mars in battle. They believed that their success in battle came from

their personal manly virtue and the properly channeled will of Mars.

But in this psalm, this expression of faith, David did not promise to do anything for God. Unlike, for example, the Roman general who promised to give his life for Mars in the upcoming battle.

So David did not promise to be a man of remarkable virtue, or to perform great exploits, or even to make any sacrifices, like the sacrifices of animals offered to Mars before battles.

2. David did not identify with a strong animal, like a bear or lion. Other people have identified him as such, but David himself called himself a sheep. A sheep! Someone tells me there is a scene in the movie “American Sniper” in which the father tells his boys at the supper table “there will be no sheep in this family!” Well, David confessed himself a sheep. A defenseless, confused, helpless sheep in the care of God.

3. David didn’t say that, since God was his shepherd, he knew everything would always go smoothly. He admitted he would need guidance in right paths. He fully expected to go through the valley of the shadow of death. He would not be the least bit surprised, if he had to eat some of his meals with enemies looking at him. And he knew that goodness and mercy would not be smoothing his path, going before him like an advance party; they would be behind him, pursuing him, cleaning up the mess.

But what did he mean by saying “I shall not want”? I don’t think he meant he would never be hungry or cold or on the run. David experienced all of those things and worse. What he meant was that, not matter what went wrong for him, having the Lord as

his shepherd was enough. He would never need to solve his problems by leaving the Lord's side.

4. David didn't say that he deserved special treatment. Most gods couldn't exist without choosing favorites. That is how the game was played. David didn't say that he was the Lord's pet lamb, his chosen sheep. He confesses himself to be just one of the Lord's flock. This psalm did not function as a "statement of loyalty" which would make God consider David his special friend.

5. David didn't turn the tables around, and pretend that he was the Lord's shepherd. He didn't say "I'll defend you from all your enemies, Lord. If anyone uses your name in vain or opposes your will, I'll fix their wagon." David knew who was shepherd, and who was sheep.

6. David's psalm was clearly not an effort to score points with God. He didn't indicate that talking about God in this way, or talking to God in this way, met some sort of requirement.

7. David didn't say (and this may surprise you, if you think about it) "I love you, Lord!" Not because he didn't love the Lord. But David's love of the Lord and his obedience to the Lord were imperfect things. Besides being good at his job, he was also a man of treachery, murder, adultery . . . the list is long. David's relationship with the Lord was special not because of how much David loved the Lord, but because of how much the Lord loved David.

I'm sure we could think of other things David didn't say in this beautiful psalm. What he did say, with each line of the psalm, is that nothing mattered to him as much as the love of his Lord. "My lord cares for me," he said. "My lord loves me." "I am beloved." No wonder. "David" means "the one who is loved" in Hebrew. We would not expect the psalm of the one who is beloved to make a big deal of his own love, his faith in the one who had created and redeemed him, whose sheep he was.

This is the sum of David's faith: humility and gratitude to the God who loved him. Living in full appreciation of what he owed to God. Walking humbly with his God, his shepherd, and in gratitude to that God seeking to do justice and loving mercy. In stumbling fashion, because of his many faults, David was faithful to the God who was faithful to him.

A few brief words about our gospel reading today. Jesus was walking in the portico of Solomon during the festival which commemorated the great Jewish military victory of the army of Judas Maccabeus (a "Messiah") over the Roman army. Tellingly, Jesus was challenged by some of the people as to whether he was the Messiah or not. Trouble is, the Messiah they wanted was one along the lines of the Roman god Mars. One who would come and lead a military campaign to liberate them from the colonial oppressors.

Jesus brushed them off, as you see. Jesus, the Messiah who was a good shepherd, did not collect Mars-worshippers into an army so he could defeat other armies. He collected the lame, the broken, the outcasts, and instilled in them a faith in God like the faith of David. It was simple: "My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." Could he have sounded any more like David's Lord and shepherd? I don't think so.

So we don't say what David didn't say. We don't brag about how much we believe in God, how grateful we are to God, etc. We don't promise to be God's little heroes. We leave the sacrificing to Jesus, trust in God for outcomes, and offer our God only our faith. Alongside the weary ones of Judea and Galilee and Samaria, along with David, we lift our voices and say "the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Amen.