



On your marks

To offer food and a generous welcome to anyone is a strong Middle Eastern tradition. There are many examples of this in the Bible, where hostility and suspicion are transformed thereby into understanding and trust. True hospitality makes no distinction between rich or poor, friend or foe, relative or stranger. At its best, it is a reflection and sign of the heart of God's gracious love and mercy towards each one of us.

In Psalm 23, David sings with sincere joy about the welcome he experiences as a guest of God's generous hospitality.

Get set

You will need:

- lots of clipart sheep
- a large sheet of paper
- crayons or felt-tip pens
- objects to mark the psalm (see Reflecting on the story)

There is a retelling of the story in The Barnabas Children's Bible (story 119). See also The Shepherd's Song, a retelling for children aged 5-7 years. For more ideas linked to this psalm, see [Sculpturing the shepherd psalm](#).

Go!

Background to the story

This is perhaps the most loved and most well known of all the psalms. It is an extended personal meditation on David's relationship with God, drawing on his own experience as a shepherd looking after his father's sheep. The very first time we hear of David in the Bible (1 Samuel 16:11), he is outdoors looking after the family's flocks, while the rest of his brothers are enjoying a festival celebration in his home town of Bethlehem. It seems that David often may have drawn the short straw and so spent many hours in the hills being a shepherd. It is on this experience that he draws as he meditates on how he is like one of the sheep and God is his shepherd.

Opening up the story

Not many of the children and families we work with will have ever seen a shepherd - in some cases, they may not even be too familiar with the behaviour of a flock of sheep. Notoriously, sheep mindlessly tend to 'follow the leader'. Play a game of 'Simon says', calling it instead 'The shepherd says', and see if you can catch anyone out!

Alternatively, print off lots of small, simple clipart sheep and hide them around your meeting area. At a given signal, set everyone off as shepherds to find as many lost sheep as possible.

Use this game, or games, as a way in to talk about the job of a shepherd. Emphasise how important this job would have been in Bible times where people's livelihood depended on selling the sheep for their meat or wool.

Telling the story

The story of this poem is probably best explored through artwork.

On one very large piece of paper, create a sacred space in the middle about the size of a plate, which should be kept free from any drawing until the end. Once that space has been established, invite each member of the group in turn to 'take his/her pen/pencil for a walk' in a continuous, wiggly line all around the space remaining. Each line should come back to, and join up to, where it started. If this is done by every member of the group, it will create a network of intertwining lines with countless small empty spaces in between. (NB: The lines should cross over each other.)

Now gather around the large piece of paper and, as you read each verse of the poem, invite everyone to choose one of the 'small' spaces and draw something inside that comes to mind linked to the verse. It could be a single image, a colour or perhaps a keyword. For example, if you have six people in your group, after reading verse 1, you will have six individual word pictures in six of the spaces. If you do this for each of the verses, then by verse 6 there should be 36 pictures filling the spaces. In effect, you are building up a piece of art together that turns the words of Psalm 23 into a visual representation. Keep turning the paper round too so that the individual drawings from any one member of the group are scattered all round. Remember though not to fill the centre space yet.

When you have finished going through the whole psalm like this, invite the group to look at each other's drawings closely and decide together which images they like the best. This middle space could then become a collection of ideas already drawn or perhaps a new idea the group comes up with together to represent the whole psalm.

Talking about the story

This psalm is a very personal and thoughtful prayer of praise to God. It focuses on the character of God, which is expressed through the commitment of a shepherd to his sheep.

- Focus first on the things that God gives, which include rest, refreshment, peace, protection, safety, food, drink, kindness and love. Now draw up a list together of all the things that God gives to us each and every day.
- David recognises God's gifts and presence in all circumstances, including the presence of enemies and the shadow of death. Talk together about times when you have felt God to be very close. Why do you think God sometimes feels closer than at other times?
- David uses his own profession as a shepherd as a launch pad to explore his ideas about God. In the same way, use your own personal situations to think through what God is like for you each

and every day. For example, your psalm might start off:

The Lord is my teacher so I always know where to come for help...

The Lord is my sports coach so I always know that he's got my best interests at heart...

The Lord is my music tutor so I can trust him to give me the best music to play...

The Lord is my driving instructor so I can be confident when I am out on the road...

How might each of these modern versions of the psalm continue?

Playing with the story

Not only is this psalm popular and loved, it is also one that has been translated, paraphrased and turned into poetry many, many times. Using the Internet or by looking in a Christian songbook that has Biblical references, find versions of Psalm 23 to compare and contrast.

Now, do the same with different Bible translations of Psalm 23 by going to www.biblegateway.com. Which translations or versions of some of the verses do you like the best? Why not have a go at your own version of this psalm, finding your own modern images for the green grass, the peaceful streams, the dangerous valley, the daring party and the overflowing cup.

Reflecting on the story

Help your group to learn this psalm off by heart using a Bible version that is easily remembered - for example, The Contemporary English Version (CEV).

They will find this easier if you have objects to put down linked to each verse. For example:

- a sheep (v.1)
- a piece of green felt (v.2)
- some blue felt (vv.2,3)
- a signpost (v.3)
- some dark felt and a shepherd's crook, which could be made from several plaited chenille wires (v.4)
- a plate and cup (v.5)
- a cross within a circle of golden thread (v.6)

Say the psalm together all the way through several times as you point to the objects. Make this your prayer of thanksgiving to God.