

“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”

Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

4th Sunday in Easter, May 3rd, 2020

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Welcome and Announcements

Opening Sentences

The Shepherd calls us by name
and leads us to abundant life.

We hear your voice and hasten to follow.

The Shepherd prepares a table
and lavishly pours out grace.

*We hear your invitation
and take our place at the feast.*

The Shepherd gathers us in
and welcomes us to the house of the Lord.

We hear your call and give you praise.

Opening Prayer

We have gone astray, O Shepherd.

*You call us to follow,
and we hear your voice.*

*Yet, we choose to heed other voices—
Voices that promise status and comfort
and a carefree life.*

*But such promises are empty,
and **that** life does not satisfy.*

Call to us again, O Shepherd.

*Summon us onto right paths
to pursue justice in your name,
to seek after the well being of all.*

*Lead us to the table you prepare for us—
where rivals share both bread and blessings
and discover there is enough for all. **Amen.***

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

John 10:1-10

10“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

I suspect that a number of you listening today *memorized* Psalm 23 at some point in your childhood. I also suspect that, like me, it took you a while to realize that the shepherd in this psalm *isn't actually Jesus*. That is: New Testament references to Jesus as the *Good Shepherd* are referencing the psalm, not the other way around. My confusion, I'm sure, came from the fact

that I memorized this psalm before I understood *in any meaningful way* the difference between the Old and New Testaments.

I'm also guessing Sunday school and Bible school story illustrations contributed to this childhood image of Jesus as the shepherd of Psalm 23. An internet image search for "*the good shepherd*" yields a vast array of both classic Bible illustrations and Eastern Orthodox icons. While many things could be said about the theological aesthetics of these images, I want to reflect on what is *lost* and what is *gained* when we conflate these various shepherd images and references.

You see, since Psalm 23 precedes the incarnation, referring to God as our *shepherd* is clearly meant to invoke a *metaphorical* image of God. For example, we know *herding* was incredibly important to and prominent among the characters we meet in the Hebrew Bible. Again thanks to the imprinting of Sunday school curricula and their illustrations, when we think of shepherds, we think of *boys* and *men*—Abraham and David being chief among them.

But we also know that shepherding wasn't solely the province of men. In *Every Living Thing*, Obed Borowski points out that ethnographic studies of the preindustrial Near East paint a picture of shepherding as work done by *girls* and *young women* as well as boys and men of varying ages. For instance, Rachel (Genesis 29:9) and Zipporah and her sisters (Exodus 2:16) are two biblical examples of young women who are skilled shepherds. This work involved being able to safeguard one's flock with a slingshot and staff.

Since shepherds weren't by definition males—and in fact by definition both males and females—then *Psalm 23's metaphor of God as a shepherd need not be limited to being represented as a male shepherd*. But we do limit this image when we conflate Jesus with the shepherd of the psalm, making them one and the same rather than underscoring the metaphor.¹

Think about this in terms of the fact that I have read the 23rd Psalm (like most Pastors) at the bedsides of quite a few people who were dying. It continues to be the most frequently requested passage among those who are facing their *own going* and still able to choose.

¹ Malinda Elizabeth Berry, *Who Is My Shepherd?*, The Christian Century, July 20, 2018

In a similar way, when I was a Hospice Chaplain I found that even for people who had wandered far from church, even for the skeptical and the uncertain, even for those who were unused to prayer and didn't want to be prayed over, the 23rd Psalm provided a place of return that was *beautiful, familiar, inviting, and reassuring*.

This is important to understand because Psalm 23 is not just for the *dying*, but very much for the *living*. For example, when I seek *still waters*, when I need *restoration*, when I need to *remember* that God is in charge and that protection is at hand, when *immediacies* are so discouraging and messy (like living through a global pandemic) that I need to set my sights on the long term--the promise that I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever--*I return to this psalm and its clear, sure, certain affirmations of faith*.

When I read or hear the 23rd Psalm, I still feel as though *I'm coming home*. Its opening declaration is simple and strong and confident. In periods of reflection I've thought about how a change of emphasis shifts its rich message:

The **Lord** is my shepherd: no one else cares for me as he or she does. There may be others who think they can occupy that role, but I know the one who cares for me.

The Lord **is** my shepherd. This is not a historical statement; in this very moment, I am being shepherded and cared for.

The Lord is **my** shepherd. The one who shepherds me is immanently, intimately present; has created me, chosen me, and loved me with a love that will not let me go.

The Lord is my **shepherd**. There may be other metaphors that teach us about God, but this one offers its own valuable, irreplaceable teaching. Shepherds *watch*. They *guard*. They *fight off* predators. They *laugh* at sheep's stupidities and love them anyway. God is a shepherd, and this is good news indeed.²

I know we are still months away from Christmas, but maybe when rehearsals for the Christmas Pageant begin, *we can resist the temptation to make all the*

² Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *A Psalm for the Living*, The Christian Century, July 16, 2015

shepherds male and instead celebrate the *liberating quality* of the shepherd, a *powerful symbol of God's compassion, protection, care, and saving grace.*

Prayer of the People

Holy and Gracious God,
you call us by name,
Beloved One,
and beckon us to follow you.
May we do so through your grace.

In your Name we pray,
Hear our prayer.

Like a shepherd tending the flock
you tend to our needs.
Be present with those who
struggle, suffer, are in pain
or *sorrow*. Guide those who are
lost, or filled with *worry* and *fear*.
Protect those who are in *harms-way*
heal those who are *ill*,
mend those who are *broken*,
as only your *love* can.

God of peace, watch over those who
lead us in our various governments
and churches, fill our leaders with
wisdom, patience, insight, and mercy.
Help them to lead with *kindness* and *strength*.

God of love, *fill* our hearts with
the knowledge of *You* that we can turn
from the distractions of life and be
more like *You*. May we be agents of
your *compassion* offering *kindness*
to those we meet this day.

God of all blessings, we thank you for all the *gifts of life*. For your Son, our savior, our great Good Shepherd, the one who *stands* at the gate of all life's challenges and joys, *calling out* to us in love. *Naming* us, *Beloved*.

For all this, and more we pray as our Lord taught us, saying ... the Lord's Prayer

Charge and Benediction