

The Good Shepherd | John 3: 16-24; John 10: 1-18

Psalm 23 was obviously one of the Scripture suggestions in the lectionary for today. This familiar Psalm reminds us of the caring and personal way by which Christ- the Good Shepherd- relates to our needs and brings great comfort. As I was reading the Scriptures in preparation for this worship service though, it felt as if Psalm 23 was an Affirmation of Faith- or statement of what we believe. It seemed appropriate to use it when we could read it together and as we do that, I hope you will once again wrap yourself in the comfort and peace that can come with it.

First of all, I want to share a new discovery I had about Psalm 23. Often, I find it helpful to check the verses prior to and following the Scriptures being used in a message. In doing that this week, I read the previous chapter- Psalm 22- which begins with, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me....” The first eighteen verses in Psalm 22 are a cry for deliverance- a cry of agony and despair- a cry feeling similar to times when we, in our humanness, feel very alone and lost. The remainder of the chapter 22, slowly works, almost begs, for the ultimate power of God to save. Then we read Psalm 23 which has this calming sense of peace and assurance of being cared for. When we are at our deepest struggle with life- as Psalm 22 puts into words, Psalm 23 is like a cool drink of water. In reading the two chapters together, there are first the words of all that is wrong in my life and then Psalm 23 reminds me, “The Lord is MY shepherd, I shall not want.” The contrast is striking and well worth remembering and possibly rereading.

The image of God or Jesus as Shepherd is one found in many places in Scripture. Shepherds and sheep were a part of the culture following the civilization of Israel after the conquest of the promised land. The importance of God as shepherd for the sheep is recorded in a number of places in the Old Testament. The people thought of the patriarchs, Moses and David, as shepherds. Thus, the shepherd figure came to be a symbol for a ruler of God’s people, an image common among the people at that time. While the image of God as Shepherd is found in the Old Testament, this image is transferred to Jesus himself in the New Testament. There are a number of Gospel parallels that use the image of a shepherd’s **care** for the sheep to describe Jesus and his **care** for his followers.

It must be said, though, that while Jesus had before him the shepherd imagery of the Old Testament, it is not to be assumed that the imagery was popular with everyone. Shepherds were not highly regarded at all by the upper crust of society. Spending time with sheep did not exactly enhance their social graces and shepherds were often considered to be dishonorable people.

The account of Jesus words in John 10, were directed at the Pharisees and others of the day who saw themselves as the infallible guides of the people and this comes after an encounter Jesus had with the Pharisees. In the previous chapter- John 9- Jesus restores sight to a man who had been blind since birth. The account of the healing, which was done on the Sabbath day- no less- was brought to the Pharisee's attention who immediately conducted an investigation. The end result was that the formerly blind man had to be lying since it was impossible for someone born blind to be able to regain their sight- especially through the action of Jesus. When Jesus hears the man had been banished from the community, he found him and reveals that he- Jesus- was the Son of Man. The once blind man believes and worships Jesus. Pharisees overhearing the conversation ask, "surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus' response is the parable that follows.

As Jesus' words begin the chapter of John 10 we find the statement, "Very truly, I tell you." John uses this expression twenty-five times in his Gospel. The expression makes the point that what Jesus says is as good as gold. It is equivalent to our comment, "I give you my word." Or in a legal sense, "I solemnly swear to tell the truth..." Jesus likely knew both sides of the reputation of shepherds when he chose to describe himself to the Pharisees who were still grumbling over the healing of the blind man on the Sabbath.

Jesus begins by telling a parable about a sheepfold. Palestinians who kept sheep often had a walled structure sometimes with hedges on top and a strong gate in the front. Sheep could be herded, often several herds, into the fold at night and be guarded more easily both from two or four footed predators. A robber would have to climb over the wall to get in, but every morning the shepherds could enter through the gate and each of the herds of sheep would come out only at the sound of each of the shepherd's voices.

Jesus attempts to clarify who he really is uses the descriptions, "I am the gate and I am the door." Jesus is the only legitimate way into the sheep fold and the protection it provides. Someone attempting to do harm to the sheep in the fold could only come into the fold by harmful ways contrary to the well being of the sheep. The only way to true peace for us is through Jesus Christ. Many people in our day try to replace God with money, job security, other people, possessions or medications. All attempts to be happy and fulfilled through these fall far short of true peace and happiness in this life and the life to come.

Self help fads come and go; new "religions" are born and fall by the wayside; money is unstable- but Jesus is our Good Shepherd to protect and keep us for all eternity. Through the great love found in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, each of us- known by name, each of us has an abundant life available to us. The way to this abundant life, is through a life lived in response to Jesus' love- listening for and responding to Jesus' voice. We can rely on the fact that Jesus knows each of us by name- impossible to comprehend, but true. -2-

I read recently of a gathering of mothers and daughters who were members of a particular organization. Following dinner, the mothers were talking while the girls were playing noisily at the other end of the room. Suddenly there was a crash, followed by a loud scream of pain. Almost before the cry had silenced, ONE mother jumped out of her chair, turned to see where the child was and hurried to her side. In a room filled with thirty-five or so girls with about twenty-five mothers, the right mother without looking, recognized her daughter's scream of pain and responded- and that's a HUMAN REACTION! In such a way, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows each of our voices and is ready to respond and comfort.

As we struggle through the challenges of being human- health issues, death, finances, concern for family, the pandemic of this past year and keeping ourselves and our family safe, etc., it is very difficult to imagine someone so completely near and available to bring comfort in spite of what happens in our lives. However, just because we cannot understand it, does not make this kind of love and care untrue- it should, instead, serve to make us all the more grateful and increase our awe for God. Our Good Shepherd cares for us because he wants us to have the abundant and eternal life available to us. How often, though, do we not forget the reality of a God who loved us so much that Jesus Christ was sent to die for all people, including ourselves?

Our Scripture found in I John 3 for this morning speaks to the enormity of the love that brought Christ to the cross. And carrying it a step further, it places challenges before us. Verse 16- "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Verse 17- "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" Verse 18- "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Verse 23- "And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us." Verse 23 is basically the "two great commandments." Love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves.

As we think of this church at this time in our lives- first of all, the challenges placed before us in this past year of Covid-19- challenges to continue to be God's face and hands for each other and to the greater mission field. But, as importantly, the challenges of continuing to worship and be God's people without the usual pastoral leadership. As we think of this church- what does the imagery of the Good Shepherd and us as the sheep hold as a message for us? Do we have total reliance on God's presence in our life together and are we confident that God's will is being worked out? Do we believe without a doubt that God has an ultimate plan for our collective life? Do we trust that God is really listening or do we believe God does not know- or care- about our need? If we truly believe and have confidence that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and capable of caring for his flock, how can we NOT spend time in prayer listening for God's guidance? If we truly believe the Good Shepherd knows our name, can we be anxious for the future?

There is little doubt that God's hand is in the awesome beauty of the natural world around us- the tulips that produce flower buds in spite of 20 degree below temperatures- birds, in spite of gloomy weather, busy themselves with sweet songs and go about doing what they were created to do? If we truly believe God cares for them, can we question if God is caring for us, in spite of what the world throws at us? God does not speak in the noisiness of our chatter, but in the quietness of our souls. May we simply and confidently step back and listen for our Good Shepherd's voice for that is where we find comfort today and into eternity.

Amen

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