

## The Pearl of Psalms- John 10:1-18; Psalm 23

If you were to close your eyes and think of a familiar picture from the Bible, what comes to mind? My guess is that for many the picture of Jesus with a lamb in his arms is high on the list. Except for the Lord's Prayer there is likely no Scripture so familiar as Psalm 23. This "Pearl of Psalms" has brought great comfort to many and often used at funeral services. Did you feel a sense of comfort and peace when we read Psalm 23 responsively as our Old Testament reading? Some of that sense may be a result of hearing familiar Scripture verses once again, but the imagery of the Psalm draws us in with the reminder of a shepherd gently caring for their flock- the flock being ourselves.

It is typical on this fourth Sunday of Easter for the lectionary readings to emphasize the Good Shepherd image. In fact, Psalm 23 is one of the recommended readings in each of the three years of the lectionary. Sunday morning messages seldom use a Psalm as a focus but it seemed appropriate to vary from that and highlight Psalm 23 this morning. You may have already noticed this worship service surrounding you with the words and images of the Good Shepherd.

David- with wonderful imagery- writes in Psalm 23 about experiences very familiar to him having learned them as a young person tending sheep. In Psalm 23, David writes from the perspective as one of the sheep- finding great comfort in the image of the loving care he receives from his Lord as an example of the care he learned was necessary to give his sheep. We could likely take individual verses of Psalm 23 and build an entire message, but I would like to look at the whole of the Psalm this morning. It seems possible that in really listening to David's words- verse by verse- we may find a new appreciation as well as a sense of calm and comfort so badly needed in this chaotic world of ours. Reading Psalm 23 as we begin each day or week might have a surprising effect on how we deal with our daily lives.

A book entitled, "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23" by Phillip Keller- has been in my library for many years. I have found it a meaningful book and would like to include some of Phillip Keller's thoughts as well as those from other resources. Primary focus is on how like sheep we humans often are and through those thoughts, hopefully find messages for ourselves.

The Psalm begins-

The Lord is My Shepherd- Note the individual words- \*"The Lord" -supreme being- not just anyone, but the LORD... , \*"is"- not was or will be, but IS my shepherd...., and \*"my" shepherd- personal... not "OUR shepherd or THE shepherd" but "MY shepherd." David, remembering how he knew every sheep by name, finds joy in knowing who his shepherd is- to whom he belongs- and says it with reassurance and confidence.

I shall not want- As David made certain his sheep had everything needed for their existence, he knew they had confidence in him just as he has that same confidence in his Lord. -1-

He makes me to lie down in green pastures- Green pastures of plenty. I understand sheep cannot be calm and relaxed unless they are free from fear, stress or friction, pests and hunger. \*If startled by the smallest thing, sheep may bolt and only the shepherd's presence will insure calm and peacefulness. For us- Unknown and unexpected happenings often produce panic- God's presence in our lives can have a calming effect. \*Tension, rivalry, constant conflict and jealousy cause sheep to become edgy and discontented. For us- the struggle for status, discord and conflict leaves us on edge- only with full awareness of our Shepherd's presence can we be calm. \*The shepherd must be constantly aware of the health of the sheep. For us- constant daily irritation, frustration, annoyances can drive us to distraction- only with daily and sometimes momentarily- contact with our Shepherd can we keep it under control. \*Sheep who are always on the move to find food are not contented and thriving. \*For us- spiritual hunger- constantly looking for true food for our souls will leave us unsettled. Only if we have confidence in the true food being available from God, can we remain calm. Isn't it interesting to consider what sheep need to be healthy- freedom from fear, friction/stress, pests and hunger- and compare them with the similarities with what we also need to live healthy lives.

He leads me beside still waters- Sheep will only drink from still water. In reality, if a sheep were caught in a stream of fast flowing water- their wool could become water logged, possibly causing them great harm, maybe even death. Sheep will drink from contaminated potholes if not carefully watched and led to clean, fresh water. For us- how easy to get ourselves in deep, troubled waters if we allow ourselves to move into dangerous areas.

He restores my soul- Psalm 42:11 asks, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" A "cast down" sheep is one on its back and often will die if not helped upright by the shepherd. For us- how often don't we run the risk of getting off balance? Material things, material success can all weigh us down so we become off balance unless righted or restored by the shepherd.

He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake- Dogs and cats can find their way home, chickens come home to roost, bees find their way back to their hives. Sheep- if they wander often cannot find their way home and are helpless unless assisted by the shepherd. For us- if we go down paths of destruction in thought or conduct, we may be forever lost unless our Shepherd leads us home.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me- The best route to the mountain top is through the valleys which are well watered, with the richest food- enticing but also where the enemies may lurk. A shepherd must guide the sheep through the valleys and protect them from the enemies that may be there. \*For us- with our eyes on our Good Shepherd, we too, will be guided through the valleys to the joy of the mountain tops. We, at times, each struggle with the "valleys of death" and are in danger of being overcome by them. But hear the words of Psalm 23- it says- "walk through the valley" NOT remain there!! What reassurance it is that God will be with us and help us "walk -2-

through” those dark times. Also note- walk through “the valley of the shadow of death” –“not the valley of death” but the “shadow.” Christ experienced and overcame the real valley of death so we only have to experience the shadow, harsh though it may seem.

Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me- The shepherd’s rod or staff of David’s time was likely a long club from a tree branch with a crook on one end. It was used for defense and protection, discipline and counting. It could be used to rescue a lamb separated from its mother. The staff could pull a sheep close for inspection, give direction with only a touch or show closeness when a shepherd would rest the staff on the side of a favorite sheep- like walking hand in hand. For us- we can find comfort in the fact that the rod or staff- the Word of God- is available for our protection and guidance. The rod or staff may also symbolize the Holy Spirit in our lives- rescuing, directing, pulling us close, sustaining us.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies- Part of a shepherd’s task is to locate fresh pastures for the sheep making sure they were safe in preparation for future days food. For us- we too, have preparations made for us as “food” to sustain us against the enemies in our world- God’s Word, prayer and listening for God’s message for us.

Thou anointest my head with oil- Sheep, troubled with pests- sometimes needed to be treated daily often with use of an oil. For us- we must have daily treatment so tiny pests do not distract and take over our lives.

My cup overflows- When all the needs of the sheep- and our needs- are met, unspeakable and indescribable contentment follows. Please note the word “needs” being met not “wants.”

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life- Sheep of a careful, loving shepherd are privileged. Even though disease or disaster come (and they will) the shepherd takes care with the end result of goodness, mercy and peace. For us- even though our lives may often seem like one disaster after another, goodness, mercy and peace will follow if we strive to remain under the loving care of the Shepherd God.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever- The Psalm closes as it began- joyous and confident. Sheep under the care and protection of a loving shepherd will thrive. When we belong to our Good Shepherd, we are surrounded by God’s presence throughout our lives AND into eternity. The thread through the whole of Psalm 23 shows the love, care and constant presence of the shepherd. What a wonderful reminder of the kind of love and care available to each us- if only we open our arms and hearts to receive it.

While we could likely stop here at the end of considering Psalm 23, the image of God or Jesus as Shepherd is a familiar one found in many other places in Scripture both Old and New Testament. 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. When Jesus had the audacity- on the Sabbath Day- to restore sight to a man who had been blind since birth, -3-

the Pharisees were quick to confront Jesus. The newly healed man was driven out because he had to be lying- no one born blind could be healed- especially by Jesus. Jesus locates the man, reveals to him who he is. The man believes and worships Jesus. The Pharisees overhearing this conversation, challenged Jesus and we find Jesus' response to them in John 10.

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. The sheep could be herded, often several herds, into the fold at night and be guarded more easily by the shepherds both from two and four footed predators. Every morning the shepherds could enter by the gate, call to the sheep who would come when they recognized their master's voice.

Jesus attempts to clarify who he really was using the descriptions, "I am the gate and I am the door." Jesus is the legitimate way into the sheep fold and the protection it provides. A legitimate person could enter through the gate, but a burglar would have to climb over the wall. The only way to true safety, peace and hope is through our shepherd. Many in our day try to replace God with money, job security, other people, possessions, medications and sometimes even other belief systems that wander from a reliance on the true shepherd's care. Self help fads come and go; new "religions" are born and fall by the wayside; the economy and our world feels unstable. But of one thing we can be confident- Jesus is our Shepherd to protect and keep us for all eternity. Through the great love found in Jesus' sacrifice, each of us- known by name, even the hairs on our head are numbered- has an abundant life available to us. The way to this abundant life, is through a life lived in the confidence of Jesus' love. As we rely on that confidence, we are able to hear and recognize Jesus' voice- much as we will always recognize the voice of our mothers who we celebrate today.

We can also rely on the fact that Jesus knows each of us by name- humanly impossible to believe, but true. Being known by our name means each of us are valued in our Shepherd's eyes. If we doubt our value, we have only to remember Good Friday and Easter Morning- our Shepherd died for each of us and overcame death for each of us.

With an overflowing cup of gratitude, we know that our Shepherd is beside us at all times. If we follow that Shepherd, resting in the confidence of constant protection, we too, can look forward to the peace of dwelling forever in the flock of our Shepherd. Thanks be to God for an awesome and unbelievable gift!

Amen

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