

Fourth Sunday in Easter, April 22, 2018

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"Surely the Good Shepherd is Here!"

John 10:9-11 & Psalm 23

INTRODUCTION

Two scripture passages have been selected for today. The first is from the New Testament – the gospel of John.

Of the four gospels, John was written the latest, possibly 20 years after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and 60 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Church had found a way to continue Jesus' ministry in the midst of an unknown future and within different cultures. They remembered the words of Jesus describing himself as the Good Shepherd, and this must have comforted them and helped them navigate life and ministry in their time.

Of course, when Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd, this metaphor was already well known to the disciples. As residents in Palestine, they would have been very familiar with the culture of sheep herding and would have heard people of other cultures call their leaders "shepherds." As Jews, the metaphor meant even more, because they understood God to be their ultimate good shepherd, demonstrating steadfast love and faithfulness throughout their history, even during the Exile and occupations by other nations. Kings, like David, became good shepherds of the people by following God's ways. As the Messiah, then, Jesus was the fulfillment of God's character and leadership.

THE READINGS

The first reading for today begins in the 10th chapter of John, verse 9. Let us listen for the Word of God:

Jesus said: "I 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 am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

The second reading is Psalm 23, the King James Version. Let us read it in unison:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

SERMON

When the movie version of the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* was released in 1973, a criticism arose from more conventional Christian viewers. They didn't perceive there to be any depiction of the resurrection in the film. After Jesus dies, the screen goes dark, the sound goes silent, and one sees just a silhouette of the cross in front of a setting sun.

Let us pray...

Have you noticed that Psalm 23 is a staple at funerals? This reading is a natural choice because the last verse refers to spending eternity in God's house. It appropriately expresses the wonderful conviction that the deceased has entered this new realm, starting his or her "forever" with God. **Surely the Good Shepherd is here!**

But Psalm 23 is *not* just for funerals. There are five full verses *before* the last one, reflecting the total arc of a fruitful life lived in relationship to God. Verse six underlines this: "*all the days of my life,*" or "*all life long.*" As Henry David Thoreau aptly wrote: "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads."¹

The arc of life starts in the first three verses. They depict a time of life that is carefree and stable. The author has enough to eat and drink, plus a level of safety that he can take for granted, and seeing the grand beauty of the earth, attributes it to the

¹Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, "The Pond in Winter," Chapter 16.

goodness of the Creator. These verses make me think of the young David, doing his job as a shepherd and making spiritual connections to a trustworthy God.

It also sounds like the child's prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep..." Though not all kids or adults receive this kind of serene beginning, we *all* may come into a period of settled love and prosperity *later*, or of another kind. This could happen as you hit your stride in a career, or become comfortable in a marriage, or discuss dreams for retirement – the stage at which Steve and I are.

Congregations can experience phases like this along their history, as well. This could occur when there is stability in clergy leadership and dedicated staff who take care of everything for us. There are always pros and cons to being settled, but a church that enjoys sufficient finances and wise planning can progress in program and advance in reputation.

This may be the place in the psalm where you find yourself, personally or communally, and if so, it is easy to say that surely the Good Shepherd is here!

Of course, a race without curves and a peace without diverse views do not test our mettle, nor spur our growth. A *good* shepherd does *not* do it all for us. A *good* shepherd prefers that we stretch, mature, and learn. The theologian, C.S. Lewis, wrote: "[God] wants [us] to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there, [God] is pleased even with [our] stumbles."²

This brings us to verses four to five of Psalm 23. As you probably noticed, here the tone and the color of the verses shift. As happens in real life, the Psalmist becomes acquainted with conflict, death, and the unknown. The writer has to remind himself of God's presence, because it is no longer obvious.

I think of David during his adult years, becoming a warrior, developing enemies in spite of his charm, and carrying out that politically savvy, cat-and-mouse fight with King Saul. David even becomes *his own* enemy in his story: a greedy adulterer, an unwise parent, whose relationships are deeply troubled. He *does* mature, but it is often through the wringer – the hard way!

Congregations can go through similar periods of uncertainty. Maybe the neighborhood changes dramatically, or conflicts arise over internal practices. In such times, if members have not nurtured their spiritual lives, their 'practical atheism' will become evident within their discussions and decisions. You know what I mean by 'practical atheism?' It's holding God as an idea, but then living and acting as if God isn't involved and doesn't really exist at all. But with sound teaching, and through a degree of trial and error, such communities of faith *can* begin to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. Doing so is the manner by which they will gain so much *more* than by walking the way that is broad and smooth!

²C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1942).

These two verses, then, represent our own “middle passages,” if you will; the times when it’s dark, confusing, and possibly dangerous. It is in this phase of life that we learn how much is really beyond our control, and eventually we find that we have no need to deny it or continue pretending.

In another church I served there was a young man named Matthew who became addicted to drugs and alcohol in his teenage years. He had grown up in the church, and no one would have predicted this turn, but he spent his twenties getting into trouble, damaging his health, and fighting his demons. This was “the white-knuckle time” for his parents!

Yes, God is our Good Shepherd, but let me say clearly, because God is our Good Shepherd does *not* mean that everything that happens in our lives is good, or that God *desires* everything that happens, nor is it all God-caused!

Matthew later testified that it was his working *with* the Higher Power that re-forged his equilibrium over the next years, and thankfully, his sobriety endured. In his early thirties, he became strong enough to serve as a resource and mentor for *others* in his TEAM recovery group. In comparison to these verses of Psalm 23, we could say that through all this, Matthew had learned that his cup was indeed full and running over with abundance – enough to fill the cups of *others*!

Maybe *this* is where you find yourself in Psalm 23? Surely the Good Shepherd is here too!

I recently watched the 1973 version of *Jesus Christ, Superstar* with commentary by Norman Jewison, the director. He recounts that while they were shooting the final scene of the cross in front of that perfect sunset, it just happened that at that very moment a shepherd walked across the field with his flock and the camera caught it. The creative team never intended this allusion to the resurrection, but struck by the coincidence of the timing, kept in the shot. He isn’t easy to make out there at the bottom of the screen – but the Good Shepherd *is* there, for sure!