

The Lord is My Shepherd

This Sunday is the Fourth Sunday in Easter and everything we read or sing or say today focuses on the Good Shepherd. The theme of God as a shepherd is well known throughout the ages. Many figures in the Bible were shepherds: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David before he was king. I think some of the things David learned as a shepherd boy helped him in his battle with Goliath.

That leads me to the 23rd Psalm, which we sang today. Although we don't know who really wrote this Psalm, it is called a Psalm of David and could certainly reflect his life, as it speaks from the perspective of someone who has lost much and is in a dark place. We know it almost by heart because we've heard it so many times. It's common to read it at funerals, because of its reference to the valley of death. But it is so much more than that. It is about how to live now, not in death. Let me explain.

The Psalm opens with the line—the LORD is my shepherd. It's a very personal thing. God is the shepherd of all the sheep, but here I declare that the LORD is MY shepherd. And I guess that means I am a sheep. Not how I like to think of myself. How do we view sheep? Shy, stupid, willing to follow anyone. That's not me!

But look a bit more closely at sheep. They are herd animals with very little in the way of natural defenses. They do have rectangular pupils that give them the ability to see between 270 and 360 degrees without moving their heads, so they can see danger approaching from any direction. And some have small horns. But that's about it. They are very social and more comfortable in groups and are quite easily led, sometimes by whichever sheep takes off toward a new pasture. They are not, however, stupid as we sometimes think. They fall somewhat below pigs in the intelligence scale, about like cows. They have been shown to remember faces—sheep faces and human faces—for up to two years.

Sheep were domesticated between five and ten thousand years ago. And shepherds have been around about as long. Because sheep are not able to defend themselves, shepherds had and still have today a very important job—keeping this valuable part of a community's wealth safe.

Side note about shearing sheep: wild sheep, and those first sheep to be domesticated, have a stiff hair outer coat, with a fine wool under coat to keep them warm in winter. When the weather warmed, they would rub themselves against bushes and rocks. Later, the women of the community would pull that undercoat out and spin it into yarn to be used to make fabric. The sheep we see today have been specifically bred to produce lots of thick wool, much more than those original sheep would have produced. And now sheep shearers use electric clippers to get that thick coat off the sheep in the spring. A good shearer can shear a large sheep in less than 10 minutes.

What does it take to be a good shepherd? Let's look at Psalm 23. The shepherd takes care of all my needs. I don't want for anything. The shepherd feeds me, making sure I have good pasture

and refreshing water. The shepherd keeps me from heading off into harm, by leading me along right paths. Even in very scary times—when I walk through the dark valley—the shepherd is with me, protecting me with a rod and a staff.

The rod is a short, heavy club that the shepherd uses to beat off predators. The staff is a long stick with a curved end that the shepherd uses to guide the sheep and to rescue them when they get stuck. We see a representation of this staff in the crozier bishops carry as a symbol of their authority and responsibility.

My shepherd makes me feel safe enough to eat. Imagine the sheep, always watchful for the predator that is lurking just behind that rock. Yet, I know that even in the presence of these enemies, the shepherd has brought me to good pasture—prepared a table for me—and I can relax and safely eat.

I know, with the shepherd watching out for me that I will experience goodness and mercy and I will be with the shepherd all the days of my life. And that's what I mean when I say this Psalm is about living, not about dying. We are invited to look to the LORD as our protector, caretaker, and comforter as we live, day to day, now.

But what does that really mean? It feels intangible or indefinite. Try something with me. Close your eyes if you are comfortable and think about something hard or scary that you might need to do. Maybe you need to have a difficult conversation with someone, or you are contemplating a decision with important consequences, or an action that you've never done before. Now imagine you must do that thing, whatever it is, without any advice or help of any kind. And if you make a bad decision or it turns out wrong, you will be blamed. People will be mad at you. You might lose friends or family. What does that feel like?

Now imagine that you are not alone. You have someone who will listen to you, lead you down the right path, give you a nudge if you start to go astray, make sure you have nourishment and rest while you are struggling, and most importantly, will love you whatever decision or action you take and however things turn out. No recriminations. No anger. Just love. How does that feel?

You can open your eyes. For me, as lovely as that sounds, the problem is that I can't see the LORD, whether God or Jesus, like the sheep can see their shepherd. The sheep see the shepherd and know him, just as he knows them. As Trace said in his sermon a couple of weeks ago, sometimes we need someone with skin on.

So, here's the real message of the 23rd Psalm. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus told us to love each other as he loves us. And he loves us like a Good Shepherd loves the sheep. So, we are each called to be the Good Shepherd for others. It's easy to do that for those we love, but we must be the Good Shepherd for even those we don't even like. Everyone around us is dealing with something hard or scary. Our job is to make sure everyone feels safe, protected, nourished, and most of all loved.

So, here's our homework for the next week. Imagine anyone you see—family, friends, neighbors, people at work or in the grocery store or the gas station, people driving next to you on the freeway—needs some nourishment or rest or protection or love. What can you do to ease their way? What can you do to make them feel safe? What can you do to show them the love our Good Shepherd has for us? And imagine what our world will be like when we all take on the role of Good Shepherd for others. Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and we will live in the house of the LORD forever.

Amen.

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Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B

Acts of the Apostles 4:15-12 * Psalm 23 * 1 John 3:16-24 * John 10:22-28

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