

Sermon: Guardian of the Flock

Seth C. Burgess, seminarian

Sunday, March 26th, 2017

10:00am Worship

Lyons First Presbyterian Church

11 Queen Street, Lyons, NY 14489

Scripture for the Fourth Sunday in Lent¹

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

A Cry Out to God

I spent most of year 2012 at Kandahar Airfield, in southern Afghanistan. There are a number of positives to living on a major airfield, if one must be forward deployed to a combat zone. For one—by the time I made it overseas the contracted services were very well developed, and the dining choices were top notch. Have you ever seen those military “MRE’s”, or Meals Ready to Eat? They now come in light-brown plastic packaging, and are the descendants of C-Rations and K-Rations. Well, it was almost none of those for me during deployment. At Kandahar Airfield, or “KAF” as we usually called it, we had the option of many dining facilities with hot food served out of the kitchen, to include different facilities for American, British, and Far East cuisine. The airfield up north, at Bagram, bragged better food, but it didn’t really matter. What a luxury to be able to enjoy hot food, and a daily menu selection to choose from

Another positive to working on an airfield in Afghanistan was the security on hand, from built-up protective walls, to the knowledge of the massive firepower of Army Aviation and Air Force fixed wing assets ready to respond. But there was a quick flip-side to this—any airfield was a major target for opposing forces. When I entered theater in April 2012, it was right in the middle of “rocket season,” when there was a high activity of rocket-propelled grenades incoming to major hubs of Coalition Forces, like KAF. I quickly became accustomed to spending time in reinforced concrete bunkers, and the “Big Voice,” which was actually a British woman’s recorded messages that would play over a base-wide PA system.

By mid-April I was assigned to an expanding location on the airfield that did not yet have the Big Voice installed, and I distinctly recall a moment when there was the sound of a loud explosion—I quickly hit the dirt, my chin tucked so I would have maximum protection from my helmet, and my arms crossed underneath my chest, body stretched out. After a few seconds, I ventured a look sideways, and noticed lots of legs. Of the twenty or so Soldiers I have just been standing with, I was the only one who had dived down. I was then informed, “that was just a controlled detonation, sir.” So I felt a bit silly.

The noises of the airfield became familiar to me, the sound of jets taking flight, the Big Voice coming on announcing “Rocket Attack, Rocket Attack” and the ensuing unique noise of an A-10

¹Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, March 26, 2017, the Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year A), <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2017/3/26/>

Warthog going out to eliminate the threat. All of these things became just a part of the backdrop, my normal day at KAF.

But there was one night in my CHU, or Containerized Housing Unit, that a new thought overwhelmed me. While laying on my bunk and listening to the ever-present sounds, out of the blue, I just felt plain *scared*. I realized that at any moment, despite the luxuries and securities of being on Kandahar Airfield, one of those ill-aimed rockets could land right where I was and there was nothing I could do about it. The moment would pass, but not without a cry out to God. It was a moment for Psalm 23.

A Psalm for the Hard Places

Psalm 23 is probably the second-most well-known passage in Scripture, the first being the Lord's Prayer. And it's likely that for us, we most regularly connect with this particular psalm in the hard places. We have heard Psalm 23 a lot at funerals, or perhaps in the hospital while visiting loved ones—or as patients ourselves. Many have memorized the psalm, and say it in personal moments, whether in celebration or in despair. What is it about Psalm 23 that especially draws us? How does Psalm 23 makes us feel? What moments can we think of in our lives, that were moments for this special psalm?

Psalm 23 is a prayer of trust. And it's versatile, in that although it is brief, it speaks to a range of movement, almost a broad brush across the human experience. This well-known psalm walks us through both peace, and war—moments of quiet serenity and the plagues of our hearts.

Remembering What We Believe

In Psalm 23, the first half of the first line of the text, “The LORD is my shepherd,”² sets the tone for the words that follow—and for many people, invokes a sense of the whole psalm. When we hear someone say, “The LORD is my shepherd,” we tend to subconsciously began to recite what comes next, “I shall not want.” And then whether we think of ourselves as having memorized Psalm 23 or not, our mind will aim keep going from there, nearly always in the translation of the King James Version—“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul... “ And we want to keep rolling.

But let's peel back to that first line, “The LORD is my shepherd.” All Christians who hear and read Scripture will eventually become familiar with the metaphor of Jesus as shepherd and the church as a flock of sheep. In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself is recorded as saying, “I am the good shepherd.”³ So, the start to Psalm 23 is a statement of belief. While the psalmist would have originally been writing of YHWH as shepherd—meaning the person of God without the significance of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross attached to it—Christians now additionally have the

² Psalm 23:1

³ John 10:11

benefit of using Psalm 23 as an aid to our walk with Jesus. When we say “The LORD is my shepherd,” we are remembering for ourselves—and before God—what we believe.

The Sheep / Shepherd Relationship

As we read or say Psalm 23, the first line always provides a context whereby the entire psalm is predicated on our being sheep. Scripture is filled with agricultural metaphors—that being a common language for ancient people who lived and worked in the fields in ways that most of us today, here in America, do not. Yet despite that gap in our appreciation for such language, we are not offended in thinking of ourselves as sheep, or being labeled as such.

At the same time, this identity as sheep provides a handy criticism of Christianity—“Oh, they say they’re like sheep... doing whatever the Bible says without thinking about anything.” But that’s not it at all. It’s not exactly being sheep that we identify with—it’s the *relationship* between sheep and shepherd. As members of the flock, all sheep are afforded the benefits of the flock’s protector. And the guardian of the flock doesn’t just see the flock as one body—the shepherd pays attention to each one.

Psalm 23 is about God and a single sheep. By turning the page to Psalm 23 in our bibles, or by recalling from memory, the effect is to make a fresh statement of our individual belief that Christ shepherds the church—and we are caused to be reminded of the joy that brings. The message of Psalm 23 is that *God is with me* personally, in darkness and in light.

Led Out of Darkness

In our selected text from the letter to the church at Ephesus (which the apostle Paul may or may not have written),⁴ the language is dominated by the metaphor of darkness and light—a metaphor most strongly used in John’s Gospel. While Psalm 23 is a reassuring poem for us, it does not miss out on the reality that there will be valleys of darkness along the way. Psalm 23 does not suggest that you—the individual sheep—will be suddenly plucked out the valley, but rather that you will be led through it.

Ephesians 5:8 says to “Live as children of light,” and this is made possible by the divine shepherd, the guardian of the flock. It is because of the shepherd’s tender care that the metaphorical light will shine for you, on your path—when you know you need it, and ask for it. The immediately preceding words in the text from Ephesians describe a before and after comparison, the writer saying to the church, “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.”⁵ And this is what God wants for you, too—to follow out of the darkness whenever astray from the flock, and be embraced in the fold and to live as children of light.

⁴ The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, p. 2089

⁵ Ephesians 5:8

Re-affirmation of Trust

By reciting Psalm 23 in our Christian walk, we are re-affirming in whom we put our trust. Whenever we claim the LORD as our shepherd, may we remember what is freely given us, and continue to be comforted by the love of Jesus—the head of the church, the guardian of the flock.

Amen.

Psalm 23 (KJV)

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

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

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

4 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.

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

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.