

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
May 8, 2022, The 4th Sunday of Easter
 Psalm 23, John 10:22-30
FOLLOWING THE SHEPHERD

I invite you to listen to this story from a (Hasidic) Jewish teacher from a couple centuries ago, that I told you years ago:

“A Parable Of Prayer”

A father and his son, travelling together in a wagon,
 came to the edge of a forest.

Some bushes, thick with berries,
 caught the child's eye.

"Father," he asked, "may we stop a while
 so that I can pick some berries?"

The father was anxious to complete his journey,
 but he did not have it in his heart
 to refuse the boy's request.

The wagon was called to a halt,
 and the son alighted to pick the berries.

After a while,
 the father wanted to continue on his way.

But the son had become so engrossed in berry-picking
 that he could not bring himself to leave the forest.

"Son!" cried the father, "we cannot stay here all day!"

"We must continue our journey!"

Even the father's pleas were not enough
 to lure the boy away.

What could the father do?

Surely he loved his son no less
 for acting so childishly.

He would not think of leaving him behind—

But he really did have to get going on his journey.

Finally he called out:

"You may pick your berries for a while longer,
 but be sure you are still able to find me,
 for I shall start moving slowly along the road.

As you work, call out "Father! Father"
 every few minutes, and I shall answer you.

As long as you can hear my voice,
 know that I am still nearby.

But as soon as you can no longer hear my answer,
 know that you are lost,
 and run with all your strength to find me!"

From *Your Word Is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer*, edited and translated by Arthur Green and Barry W. Holtz, pp. 109-110, quoted in Postema, Donald, *Space for God, The Study and Practice of Prayer and Spirituality*, Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1998, p. 47

We are loved by our God who, in the words of Anna Murdock's poem on the bulletin cover "leads, restores, guides, comforts, prepares, and anoints and blesses us."

We are loved by our God we can run to with all our strength,
and all our weakness,
whenever we feel lost, or afraid, or overwhelmed,
God's love is always pursuing us, always waiting for us, always there for us.

In the words of the Jewish story, when we are distracted, or lost, or overwhelmed, or hurting, or grieving, or just off picking berries,
we can always run with all our strength into the waiting arms of our God.
God always knows where we are.
God is always waiting and watching for us.

One of the pictures the Bible gives us of this promise of God's constant love is found in the ancient words of Psalm 23. Written over 3,000 years ago, these words about God our Shepherd still have so much present-day comfort to offer us.

And they were clearly words that shaped Jesus' life because in John Chapter 10, Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd.

I would guess that for many of us, there may be something almost visceral in our reaction when we hear those opening words of Psalm 23. "The Lord, is my shepherd I shall not want."

In part that may be because we have heard this Psalm so often at funerals. These words stir up memories.

But I hope you realize that the strong comfort of this Psalm is for us in all that life holds,
not only when we're grieving,
but in our day-to-day living,
or when we're lost, overwhelmed, scared, threatened,
anxious or worried,
and all the many times in life we need to be reminded that we have a
Shepherd.

And really, isn't that every day of our lives that we need to be reminded of the Good Shepherd?!

For me, when I hear "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," I am instantly reminded that I am not alone in whatever I am facing in my own life, or in one of your lives. There is Someone in my life who is bigger, stronger, and understands so much more than I do about whatever is happening.

And that shepherding God who is bigger and stronger is our God who loves us moment by moment as God "leads, restores, guides, comforts, prepares, and blesses us."

No wonder Psalm 23 is still touching our lives over 3,000 years after it was written!

When Jesus was teaching the disciples and the crowds, he used things from their world to help them understand the ways that God was active in their lives. He was also speaking to people who loved Psalm 23 as much as we do. And he was speaking to people who, for the most part, knew everything there was to know about shepherds and sheep. But since most of us don't live in that world it's helpful to know how the people in the Bible times would have heard the words of Psalm 23 and Jesus' words to his disciples in John 10.

When Jesus said to his followers: “I am the Good Shepherd,” and when the psalmist first sang Psalm 23, they were referring to the known ways that shepherds cared for their sheep.

Shepherds led their flocks to *green pastures* where they could eat good and healthy food, and be free from starvation.

Shepherds led their sheep *beside still waters* because sheep will only drink water that isn't fast moving. It is only when they feel safe beside calm waters that they will feel safe enough to drink deeply from life-giving water.

Sheep could only *rest and sleep* in the green pastures when they felt completely safe, and their shepherds kept watch, protecting the sheep from the attacks of wolves and other predators.

A shepherd's *rod* was a thick stick used as a defensive weapon against predators, and the *staff* helped guide the sheep along.

The staff often had a hooked end that was used to pull sheep back from danger, or to pull them out of some place where they had gotten stuck.

At the end of each day shepherds would gather their sheep into stone pens with an opening on one side, often sharing that space with other shepherds and flocks out on the hillsides.

Shepherds knew their sheep by name, and as each one passed into the pen at night the shepherd would check that sheep or lamb for any sign of injury, or infection, or lameness.

Sometimes there was a wooden gate to the pen, and the shepherds would sleep in front of it protecting the sheep, and sometimes the shepherds themselves were the gate, sleeping on the ground in front of that narrow opening into sheepfold, guarding the sheep from getting out

and protecting the sheep from wolves and other predators getting in.

It was this practice that led Jesus to say that not only is he the Good Shepherd, but he was the Gate for the Sheep, he is the protection against all trouble.

In the early morning as the shepherds prepared to take their individual flocks back up into the hills, each would stand at the opening to the pen. They would call to their sheep, and their own sheep would recognize the voice of their shepherd. Only the sheep of their flock would separate themselves from the others and come out to the shepherd.

I had a colleague who was on a tour of the Holy Land a few years ago, and saw this happen one morning as a shepherd called and just his sheep came out of the pen. She said, of all the things she saw in the Holy Land, it was one of the highlights of her trip, seeing John 10 take place before her eyes.

In this morning's reading from John, Jesus said to his disciples then, and to each one of us this morning: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.”

Jesus was telling them, and telling us, that once we belong to the Good Shepherd we will be loved, protected and cared for, today, tomorrow, and for all eternity.

No predators, no life experiences, no wolves or bears or enemies will snatch us away from the love of God that is for each one of us in Jesus.

Nothing can take us away from the love of our Good Shepherd,
not depression, grief, loss,
not fear, pain, addiction,
not worries, bullies, past traumas or abuse,

not illness, PTSD, whatever is currently breaking our heart,
and not that one thing you wish I'd put into this list,
can separate us from the love of God.

Nothing can separate us from the love of the Good Shepherd, nothing can snatch us out of God's love. Nothing!

Several years ago, when I preached on John 10, that image of Jesus in front of the sheepfold each night changed part of my own faith journey. I now find it very comforting as I am getting ready to go to sleep at night, or when I'm feeling overwhelmed by something, to imagine that I am in Jesus' sheepfold, and he is watching over me.

It changes the way I go to sleep, to know that I am held in Jesus' love and care through the night and into the next morning, when he will call me by name to follow him into the new day. It is also the image I return to if I can't get to sleep because I'm worried or concerned about something in my life, or your lives, or on those nights it's just hard to turn my brain off and relax into sleep.

It reminds me that the Good Shepherd, who knows me by name, is stronger than whatever is going on, and I am loved and held by Jesus who "leads, restores, guides, comforts, prepares, and blesses" each one of us. You and I are held safely in Jesus' sheepfold.

Then when I was on Sabbatical I learned another spiritual practice that I shared with you then and want to share again, that has also become part of my faith journey. When I was out in New Mexico at Ghost Ranch, I took a class with the Celtic teacher, the Rev. John Philip Newell. One of the nights he invited a Diné, or Navajo Shaman who is a religious leader and teacher to speak to our class. We sat out under one of the mesas, around a campfire, and she shared her wisdom with us. One of the things she taught us came home with me and into my spiritual practices. She encouraged us to place our hands on our hearts, and know the Spirit of God there. With each beat of our heart, she encouraged us to remember that God is as close as our heartbeat.

It is something that I have said to you for years, from this pulpit, and as we've prayed together in my office, your homes and in hospitals. "God is as close as your next heartbeat."

It's something I already believed, but it changes and deepens that belief to actually put my hand to my heart and know that beat by beat God the Good Shepherd is with me.

In the midst of all our lives hold, putting our hands on our hearts, brings us back to the truth of God's constant love and care.

In the words of Psalm 23 it is one of the ways that God leads us beside the still waters and restores our souls.

I pray that each of you will remember and know deeply that in the beat by beat of our hearts, Jesus the Good Shepherd, who knows each one us by name, is loving us, comforting us, healing us, protecting us, and holding us. Beat by beat.

In conclusion today I am going to invite each of you to enter into a time of prayer with me. I invite you, if you so choose, to close your eyes now, and as you do that, I ask God to be with us in this moment.

Now, with your eyes closed, if you are willing, take a moment imagining yourself entering into the sheepfold of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Imagine yourself held in that place of peace and protection, with Jesus at the entrance protecting you in all that your life holds. Know that you can enter this place any time you choose, day or night, as you imagine yourself in Jesus' sheepfold.

(WAIT)

Now I invite you to put your hand to your heart. Sit for a moment and beat by beat be aware of the constant presence of Jesus your Good Shepherd living in your life. Know that God is

always as close to you as your next heartbeat. (WAIT)

Together we pray: Jesus our Good Shepherd, with our hands on our hearts, we are so thankful to be here with you. And we thank you this day for the words of comfort and promise that you give to us in Psalm 23:

- 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. Amen.

And the children of God opened their eyes and responded: Amen.

P.S. In preparing today's sermon I learned one more thing. At the end of Psalm 23 we hear those words: "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the day of my life." In the Hebrew the verb translated as "follow" is actually a much stronger word. Literally this verse says, surely goodness and mercy will **pursue** me all the days of my life." Not only are we loved by the Good Shepherd, but we will spend our lives being pursued and chased by God's goodness and mercy.

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p. 437.1.3

BULLETIN COVER:

"The Verbs of God for the People of God"

Our verbs are often
 so weak, O God.
 Lower case and weak
 and wayward ...
 bleating and
 baa'ing and
 wandering
 as we are
 so apt to do.

But oh, how precious
 to us are the verbs
 of our Shepherd!
 Upper case and strong
 and loving!
 LEADS,
 RESTORES,
 GUIDES,
 COMFORTS,
 PREPARES,
 ANOINTS!

Yes, how precious to us
 are your verbs, O God.
 How sweet it is
 to hear the voice
 of our Shepherd.
 How beautiful it is,
 this perfect melody
 of our own psalm,
 so lovingly composed
 by you.

anna murdock
 Lay Servant
 Broad Street UMC / Statesville, NC
www.pewponderings.blogspot.com
 (cf: SER-16-04-17)