

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
April 25, 2021, The Fourth Sunday of Easter
 Psalm 23, John 10:11-18
THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Anna Murdock is a poet, author and church member from North Carolina, whom I met through a preacher's e-group. As we spend time with the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 this morning, I invite you to hear her poem:

"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.

LEADS, RESTORES, GUIDES, COMFORTS, PREPARES, ANOINTS!

We need our God who does these things in our lives don't we?
 On this long weary road of the world pandemic,
 in the heartbreak of our nation's, and our neighborhood's, racial divisions finally being seen
 again and again,
 in the midst of our own stories and concerns that we bring to worship this day,
 what a relief to hear the ancient words of Psalm 23 and John 10 reminding us again that we are not
 alone. We are known, and cared for, and loved by our God, our Good Shepherd, who
 LEADS, RESTORES, GUIDES, COMFORTS, PREPARES, and ANOINTS! 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,
 or scared of the uncertainties of the future,
 or overwhelmed by another death, or critical illness, in the circle of our family,
 or our circle of friends,
 or when we need to be reminded that we are never, ever alone.
 God's love is always pursuing us, always waiting for us, always there 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.

These words that comforted our ancestors back through the centuries are living words for us
 today.

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 of saying goodbye to loved ones. "Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow
 of death I will fear no evil," the old King James version says.

But I hope you realize that the strong comfort of this Psalm is for us in all that life holds today
 too.

In more current translations of these verses, we hear "Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil."

Psalm 23 is for us
 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 those many times in life we need to be reminded that we have a Shepherd who
 LEADS, RESTORES, GUIDES, COMFORTS, PREPARES, and ANOINTS! us.

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

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 speaking to people who loved Psalm 23 as much as we do. And he was speaking to people that, 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 Bible times would have heard the words of Psalm 23 because it takes us even deeper into the comfort of this Psalm

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. The shepherd carefully fed them.

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. The shepherd kept them hydrated. 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.

The shepherd protected and comforted the sheep.

At the end of each day shepherds would gather their sheep into caves or 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 reach down and check each sheep or lamb for any sign of injury, or infection, or lameness.

A couple weeks ago Laura Brown sent me a text with some new learning about the shepherds in Bible times, and sheep then, and now.

The author writes about verse 5 "you anoint my head with oil." He says that he thought it was poetic language for God keeping the Psalmist healthy. But he did some more reading and learned that "Balsam oil was highly valued in the ancient world. A 2000 year old jar of it was found in a cave (where shepherds might find shelter) near the Dead Sea in 1989. This oil is commonly mentioned in the Bible and also known as the "Balm of Gilead". It is soothing, anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, anti-fungal, and anti-parasitic.

Sheep can get their head caught in briars that cause injury; they can even die trying to get untangled.

When male rams fight, they often butt heads and can do great damage to each other. Both of these injuries need to be treated with oil.

And while this next detail about sheep is a bit graphic, it helps us understand the comfort of this verse even more deeply. There are also little nose flies that torment sheep by laying eggs in their nostrils. The hovering flies cause the sheep to panic and run wild.

If the fly is successful, in just a few days the larvae hatch and burrow into the sheep's soft nasal passages, causing irritation, inflammation and infection.

The pain caused by this infestation often causes sheep to beat their heads against tree trunks or against the ground to get away from the pain.

If the sheep manages to survive, the infection caused by the larvae can cause it to go blind.

Because of the seriousness of the problems caused by nose flies, shepherds must be extremely attentive to their sheep.

So, the shepherds anointed the sheep's whole head with oil. "Then there was peace." The soothing, anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, anti-fungal, and anti-parasitic oil anointed the entire sheep's head with protection and with healing. The shepherd healed the sheep.

"WEDNESDAY WORD- PSALM 23" <https://ne-np.facebook.com/TheFarmStandBobier/posts/2878882082357360>.
See also: <https://farmandanimals.com/why-do-shepherds-put-oil-on-sheep/>

At the end of the day having checked their sheep, having anointed their heads with oil, the sheep went into the pen for the night. 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 was he the Good Shepherd, but he was the Gate for the Sheep, he was 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.

Later in John 10, Jesus said to his disciples then, and to 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."

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

No predators, 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, the loss of life as we have known it,
not fear, pain, addiction, or world pandemics,
not worries, bullies, past traumas or abuse,
not illness, PTSD, whatever is currently breaking our heart,
and not that one thing you're thinking of right now that you wish I'd put into this list,

nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Nothing can separate us from the love of the Good Shepherd who leads us to safe places,
who takes us to places of healing and comforting rest,
who anoints our lives with healing and protection,
nothing can pull us out of God's love. Nothing!

Psalm 23 ends with the words: "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the day of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." In the original 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, protected, healed and cared for 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

Because each of us is known, and called by name by our Good Shepherd who:
LEADS, RESTORES, GUIDES, COMFORTS, PREPARES, and ANOINTS! Us. Alleluia! Amen!