

Sunday, April 30, 2023
Psalm 23, John 10:11-18
“God is not done yet”
The Rev. Joan Wither Priest, Preaching

I begin with a story by an unknown author entitled: I know the Shepherd.

There was once a Shakespearean actor who was known everywhere for his one-man shows of readings and recitations from the classics. He would always end his performance with a dramatic reading of Psalm 23.

Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation - "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want" . . . the crowd would listen attentively. And then, at the conclusion of the Psalm, they would rise in thunderous applause in appreciation of the actor's incredible ability to bring the verse to life.

But one night, just before the actor was to offer his customary recital of the Psalm, a young man from the audience spoke up. "Sir, do you mind if tonight I recite Psalm 23?" The actor was quite taken back by this unusual request, but he allowed the young man to come forward and stand front and center on the stage to recite the Psalm, knowing that the ability of this unskilled youth would be no match for his own talent.

With a soft voice, the young man began to recite the words of the Psalm. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by the young man's recitation that every eye was full of tears. Amazed by what he had heard, the actor said to the youth, "I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training - but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me, what is your secret?"

The young man quietly replied, "Well sir, you know the Psalm... I know the Shepherd."

My friends, this is what many call Good Shepherd Sunday, so I picked the two most familiar Biblical passages about God as our shepherd and Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Now, I don't know about you, but most people don't like the image of God as our Shepherd or Jesus as the Good Shepherd, especially if that means we are sheep. Because frankly, sheep are well, kind of stupid animals. Seriously, sheep are directionless, especially in desert areas where there is very little grass, sheep will wander off and become helplessly lost. They are defenseless – they have no claws, sharp teeth, hard shell for protection, and in the desert; there are wolves and other wild animals who love to devour sheep.

And as one writes, these "seemingly timid animals can be cruel [too], with the stronger ones biting and butting the weaker ones. [And] Sheep are greedy. They'll see a tuft of grass and push into a clump of thorn bushes to get it. In the process, they can get their long coats tangled in the thorns and become permanently caught—and eventually starve to death. [And] they stray too. A sheep will keep its head down, nibbling at tufts of grass, moving further and further away from the safety of the flock, until it is completely lost or in danger. They will even follow a line of grass right over the edge of a cliff!" (1) Are we like sheep? Really?!

And Shepherds? Shepherds have a very hard life, they are never off duty. They have to be vigilant, fearless, and patient with these silly animals. Oh, so wait a minute. If Christ is our Shepherd, yeah, maybe that's not such a bad image. Maybe we should actually be quite grateful, for Christ the Good Shepherd loves each and every one of his sheep, the Good Shepherd loves us even in our moments of foolishness and weakness and fear and doubt and confusion and questioning. He loves us when we are lost and directionless, wandering and hopeless, when we are greedy and hurtful, hateful and unkind, and is always on duty, always ready to carry us, protect us, guide us. Are we like sheep? OK then, if Christ is our shepherd!

But then Jesus states, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also." This is the phrase that struck me this week because it sounds like Jesus isn't done yet. God isn't done yet. There are still more sheep to reach. Which means, as one writes, "God continues to call people from all walks of life, from every nation on the face of the earth, and from each and every generation across two thousand years since Jesus first uttered those words until today. (Plus) God is at work in our midst and through us and our congregation to extend the invitation to abundant life offered by the Good Shepherd." Think about that, simply praying for someone, reaching out to someone, helping someone - you are a vessel by which God continues to reach out and embrace God's beloved sheep. God is still searching. Jesus is still calling. (2) God is working through all this. And so I ask, in what ways is he working through you right now? What ways are you reaching out, being Jesus' continuing word, a shepherd, in the world?

This church has things going on here and in the community each and every day. Have you ever thought of these little things as the continuation of God's kingdom, active today? God is working to bring us together in one flock, to show all, in whatever way God can manage that Jesus' mercy and grace are for all. God is not done yet. And that is why John uses the phrase the Good Shepherd. Now we might think, why Good - why not the most extraordinary shepherd or the most spectacular awesome shepherd. Why just good?

"Because we are asked to be the shepherd as well. Think about it. If we had to follow in "extraordinary" footsteps, (awesome footsteps) we would find every excuse possible, every explanation imaginable, to decline Jesus' command. We'd repeatedly deny our identity, deny our discipleship, just like Peter. "Surely, you are one of his disciples, aren't you? I am not, said Peter. But Jesus will not let him say no. 'Simon Peter, do you love me? Tend my sheep. Feed my lambs. Shepherd my sheep.'" (3) So the good news is that, this is more than about us being sheep. Thank goodness, because sometimes we focus so much on following the shepherd, being protected by the shepherd, being sheep, that we forget he commands us to be shepherds. He has other sheep to bring into the fold. His work is not done yet. Jesus asks us to be his shepherds in the world, in our congregation, in this community, and feed his sheep, tend to his sheep, love his sheep.

Now out of the hundreds of images in our scriptures of the Great Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, Psalm 23 is the most familiar passage of them all, am I right? The 23rd Psalm is known as a song, David's song of trust, trust in a God who is everything. Knowing that when one is in a time of danger and disaster, storms or raging waterfalls, even pandemic's and isolation, searching for a new pastor, we can trust God to be present as our shepherd to guide us through. So let's spend a moment looking at these beautifully poetic words.

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. My shepherd. The one who knows my needs, hears my cries, knows me. And with the beginning of the season of spring, we are greatly aware that the Lord, our shepherd is the one who provides for us tranquility found in nature, peace that can restore our winter weary souls by green pastures, blooming trees, swaying daffodils, still waters; where we are fed and nourished by God's beautiful world around us. And by God's word we absorb the food for our souls and in the stillness of being with God, wherever this place is for you, we drink the water of God's spirit, and are brought back to a place of righteousness and peace. And God doesn't show us, God makes us to lie down, forces us at times to stop and take a moment and just be.

We may get lost, we may feel scared and alone and afraid, but the shepherd will find us and bring us back on the right path; the shepherd will pick us up and place us upon his shoulders and carry us for awhile if we need that; the shepherd will keep us in his care until we are strong enough to make it on our own. There are times when we need to be carried, carried until we are strong enough to become Christ-like shepherds to other sheep who are in need.

The Psalm continues, for God's rod and staff, they comfort us. Okay, now here in the Psalm is an image I can really relate to especially as a parent or shepherd of two children! I tell you, I certainly wish at times I had a rod – what I mean is – what the author means is - a large stick used to ward off the enemies – enemies - wolves, bullies, mean kids, and the ability to ward off huge temptations which they face like drugs and alcohol. And at times I too wish I had a large staff with a hook on the end like shepherds have, to bring them back in, even as they are young independent adults like mine are, and pull them out of the hole they are stuck in, or guide them when they stray onto the wrong path. Guide them even through the deep dark valley's of life. For God's love for us will be overflowing; for God's goodness and mercy will not only follow us all our days, it will pursue us, especially if we trust in the guidance and protection of the provider of the banquet. I know my sheep, Jesus says. Jesus knows our pain, our sorrow, our fears, our frustrations and is ready to carry us.

Its why we brought our kids every Sunday, or have started bringing our children and even our grandchildren. Its because we are hoping and praying that their hearts and minds will be open to a high power, a presence in their hearts, a path to follow, a word to listen to for direction and meaning, a shepherd to guide them. Of unconditional acceptance into God's kingdom, of the love of Christ in their lives, of the truth which will allow them to move a bit freer, in this complicated sometimes cruel world.

I will never forget the year my son, now all grown up, then maybe 9 years old, was asked by the children's choir director to play the role of Daniel in "Daniel and the Lion's Den" in our children's church play. What the choir director didn't know was that year my son was being bullied in school and had lost all self confidence. Now you can imagine why I sat and cried and cried when he stood in the pulpit singing, full of confidence, "here I am Lord, it is I Lord", knowing that in that church, he was loved and accepted and protected.

So when you see that shy little child raising their hand with a silly question during the Children's Moment, that youth stumbling up to light a candle, just smile because you are showing them that God smiles on them too, that Jesus listens to them; and when we bring another child into our care through baptism, we are showing them and their parents that here, they are loved and accepted no matter what, for we are creating a strong faith on the inside and the power of God's love to protect them on the outside.

We have all been in the darkness, the deep, deep valley of the shadow, some of you are there right now, but we also know God is in our darkness, walking with us. And we all know that when, and someday it will happen, our children, our youth, our grandchildren will enter into those times where they find themselves in the deep, deep dark valleys, and even if they don't believe it, we will know that when all brings them down, there is a power and love so much stronger than all of us which will hold them close, never to let them go. And they need that, we have needed that.

I will never forget the year my daughter was asked to preach on a special Youth Sunday they called it. What the Youth Minister didn't know was that my daughter had recently been diagnosed with depression and it had hit her hard. So when she said to the congregation, "I may not know where I am going but I know where I have been. Connections, like the ones I have here, have saved me; I strive for others to be in the same place that I am today. I want them to know what it is to live. I would tell them, to just breathe." You know why I cried and the congregation just sat and smiled but that was enough.

She would say that even though no one in that congregation knew all of the struggles she was going through, her family knew, and God knew, and she knew that she could enter that church, as the youth enter this church, as the babies are received in this church, and receive unconditional love and acceptance. She knew that she belonged, weak, powerless, afraid, struggling, she had a home. That's powerful, powerful shepherding my friends!

Yea though I walk THROUGH – with the most important word being – through, we can walk through the deep valley of the shadow. Jesus is the good shepherd because he knows his sheep and calls them by name. A hired hand really does not care like a shepherd does. For a shepherd cares for every one of his sheep, because this shepherd will go all the way to the cross and lay down his life for us, and take up his life again in the resurrection and the ascension where he abides and prepares a place for us.

To be Christ's sheep, to follow in the light of Christ and walk in the love of God, is to walk behind, with Christ leading us, to be open to the twists and turns of the road. My friends, no one said life was going to be easy, for we know in this life there is suffering, pain, confusion and struggle, the Bible clearly tells us that there will be times when we will all dwell in the valley of the shadow, but Christ also tells us that it's okay to be just silly lost sheep sometimes, for we know that when we stumble or fall or lose our way or are just weary from life, we will be carried and find peace resting on the shoulders of love. Until we are ready to be a shepherd for others. And here is the promise, while it may not be an easy life, it will be a great one, for we shall never perish; and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord, forevermore.

I close with Mac Lucado's new version of the 23rd Psalm based on Jesus' words, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." He states, Rest my friends, rest.

Rest from the burdens of a small god. Why? Because we have found **the Lord**.
Rest from doing things only your way. Why? Because **the Lord is our Shepherd**.
Rest from endless wants. Why? Because we **shall not want**.
Rest from weariness. Why? Because **he makes us to lie down**.
Rest from worry. Why? Because **he leads us**.

Rest from hopelessness. Why? Because **he restores our souls.**
Rest from guilt. Why? Because **he leads us in the paths of righteousness.**
Rest from arrogance. Why? Because of **his name's sake.**
Rest from the valley of death. Why? Because **he walks us through it.**
Rest from the shadow of grief. Why? Because **he guides us.**
Rest from fear. Why? Because **his presence comforts us.**
Rest from loneliness. Why? Because **he is with us.**
Rest from shame. Why? Because **he has prepared a place for us
in the presence of our enemies.**
Rest from disappointments. Why? **Because he anoints us.**
Rest from envy. Why? Because our **cup overflows.**
Rest from Doubt. Why? Because **he follows us.**
Rest from homesickness. Why? Because
We shall dwell in the house of our Lord forever and ever. Amen.

- 1) Gondola, The Rev. Alex. Lectionary for Homiletics, April "Good Shepherd seeking sheep".
- 2) Lose, The Rev. David. "God is not done yet!" 4/20/2015.
- 3) Lewis, The Rev. Karoline. "On Being the Good Shepherd" 4/15/2018