



Psalm 23 **Sheep and Shepherds**
4th Sunday of Easter **April 25, 2021**
Deacon Charlotte Downing

More than a year into a global pandemic, we all need good news. So we reach back in time and find that good news being said in our readings this morning. We hear about abiding love, love in truth and action and we hear Jesus say, "I am the Good Shepherd." Then we are particularly drawn to reach way back (about 3,000 years or so) to this morning's responsive reading, the 23rd Psalm from the songbook of Israel. Many attribute the writing of Psalm 23 to King David. He was a shepherd in his youth preparing to shepherd God's flock – Israel. The psalm may reflect King David's experiences as he reflects on God as shepherd of his life. The theme of Psalm 23 is to trust in God always being with us in difficult moments (such as those resulting from the pandemic). God is our comfort, protection and hope; always watching us as a good shepherd watches over the flock of helpless sheep in his care. Can we who are so removed from sheep and shepherds really understand what scripture is saying when it talks about shepherds and sheep?

In the ancient Near East, shepherds were common figures. The land was not rich enough for sheep to graze in one place all year long. Sheep had to be moved from pasture to pasture. Someone had to know where good grazing was to be found. Someone had to move the sheep to those green pastures. In ancient times, before barbed wire and electric fences, someone had to keep the sheep together wherever they were. That someone was the shepherd serving as a kind of moving, human fence. He led the sheep to good pastures. He kept the sheep together. He protected and cared for them.

Shepherds and sheep-- In ancient societies that were familiar with both, shepherds and sheep were useful images. Ancient Near Eastern kings liked to think of themselves as shepherds. They were the protectors of their people. They cared for them and kept them safe. They fenced them in, so to speak. They might not move their peoples from place to place in actual fact, but they moved them figuratively. They were the ones in charge. The people were just sheep. We don't know how ancient peoples felt about being described that way, but being a sheep is not a very complimentary image. Sheep, especially domestic sheep, are not the most intelligent of animals. They don't do a very good job caring for themselves. A sheep that wanders away from the flock does not survive for long. Wild animals, sickness, and hunger are ever-present threats. In addition, a sheep can even manage to scare itself to death. To be a sheep is to be not too bright-to be powerless-to be dependent. Ancient Near Eastern kings had all the power. The people they ruled over had none. So then, the image reflected the positions of king and people. Sheep have no defense against a shepherd that means them harm. The people had no defense against

evil rulers. The people's prayer in the ancient world was that those who ruled over them be good shepherds.

The Israelites at first didn't have any kings, but they did have leaders. In Numbers 27:27 Moses asks God to appoint Joshua to be his successor, lest the congregation of the Lord be like sheep without a shepherd. Each time a crisis arose in the centuries that followed, God commanded leaders to shepherd Israel. Finally, Israel demanded a king. In 2 Samuel 5:2 God tells David, "It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel."

The hope was always that Israel's kings would be good shepherds, wielding their power for the good of the people, who, it was generally noted, belonged not to the king but to God. The reality was something less. Prophets such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Zechariah lamented the poor care of the people Israel given by kings.

The shepherds appointed to watch over Israel were, on the whole, not good shepherds. Even very able, good kings like David or Hezekiah or Josiah fell short. It is not surprising, then, that the people began to yearn for shepherds that would not fail them, shepherds that would rule well and look to their well-being. Israel's hope takes two forms. The first hope is that God will choose to act as Israel's shepherd. God will seek out his sheep. God will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered, feed them and give them a safe place to lie down. God will seek the lost, bring back the strayed and care for the injured and the weak. God will be their shepherd. The second hope is that God will raise up new shepherds who will remain true to their calling, to truly shepherd them. In Jeremiah 3:15 God says, "I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." And so, long, long after these times, it is Jesus, the son of God, who is the Good Shepherd-compassionately teaching and feeding crowds of harassed, helpless people...the last, the lost and the least.

Finally, there is today's psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

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

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

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.

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

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.

I thought you might appreciate hearing the 23rd psalm in the King James version. Even though I am a supporter of modern translations, I am partial to the King James text when it comes to this psalm. What a wonderful affirmation of faith the 23rd psalm is. What a comfort it is. It sustains us in the darkest of times. It

springs to our mind when we find ourselves menaced by death, when all seems lost, when we despair and, of course, during the time of this pandemic. We should not, however, sing this psalm only when the darkness reigns. God should not be our shepherd only in the worst of times, only when we cry the tears of despair, only when we feel the chill of death. If God is our shepherd in the worst of times, we must accept God as our shepherd in the best of times. The 23rd psalm must be our prayer to God in both ordinary and extraordinary times.

In our responsive reading today we said, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.” God as our shepherd keeps us from lacking those things which we truly need. God does provide us with things – material and spiritual – we need to live as human beings created in God’s image.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” For the ancient Israelites who depended on such pastures for their very survival, this was a powerful image for God’s sustaining nurture and love. For us today, it is easy to forget that behind the shelves of the supermarket stand green pastures. Every spring when the grass, trees and bushes turn green, we instinctively know that green is a sign of life. God creates green pastures and as our shepherd, creates life for us.

“He leadeth me beside the still waters.” Still waters are waters of rest and the opposite of raging waters, the angry sea and a river in flood that symbolize chaos. Restful waters sustain rather than take life. In a world in which chaos threatens to overwhelm us, God our shepherd provides rest for us.

“He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” God’s shepherding keeps us fat, safe, and happy. God renews our spirits when they fail, pulls us back on track and points us in the right direction. God does not shepherd us to lie in the pasture beside the pond. God shepherds us onto paths that lead to right relationships and right actions.

“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.” This is the verse we cling to when times are the darkest. No one passes through life untouched by death. Death is scary particularly when it is very close to us. It is an irrevocable change. Life is never again as it was. When death happens, it frightens us and like sheep, we frighten easily. But God, our good shepherd is with us. We see this as truly good. How wonderful it is to have God with us especially when we are doing good. However, when we are doing bad we better watch out for the rod and staff of the shepherd being used for discipline and control of the sheep. Sheep are not free to go wherever they want or free to do “their own thing”..

Forty-some years ago Carl Burke was a prison chaplain working with inner city youth. He found that the young people he was working with had trouble relating to the language of the bible. For example, they’d never seen a sheep, much less shepherd. So Chaplain Burke encouraged these young people to paraphrase some of the bible stories into their own language, thought patterns and experience. The book, “God is For Real Man” was the result. In the book, the 23rd psalm becomes “the Lord is like my probation officer.” This was not so elegant a composition as the 23rd psalm but does capture an aspect of God’s shepherding that we sometimes forget.

The Lord is like my Probation Officer,
He will help me,.

He tries to help me make it every day.
He makes me play it cool
And it feels good inside of me.
He shows me the right path
So I'll have a good record,
And he'll have one too.
Because I trust him,
And that ain't easy,
He makes sure I have my food
And that Mom fixes it.
He helps her stay sober
And that makes me feel good
All over.
He's a good man, I think,
And he is kind;
And these things will stay
With me.
And when I am kind and good
Then I know the Lord
Is with me like the Probation Officer.

How do we feel about God as our probation officer? That's the other part of shepherding. If God is our shepherd, God expects to do more than just bail us out when we get in trouble. If the shepherd just runs after the sheep that stray and get in trouble, there is no flock. As sheep we are expected to stay with our shepherd, to know his voice. Have you ever watched sheep dogs work? They circle the flock endlessly, nipping at the heels of any sheep that might be thinking of straying. How do we feel about God nipping at our heels? I know I want God the helper, the bailer out of trouble, as my shepherd. I am much less enthusiastic about God the probation officer, God the stern taskmaster. I like "doing my own thing". But, if God is truly my shepherd, I can't just "do my own thing". As my shepherd, God demands much more of me. Why should we be willing to give up "doing our own thing"? The psalmist has an answer.

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

God prepares a table for us-God anoints us with oil-our cup overflows-all ancient metaphors for joy and happiness. That is what dwelling in the house of the Lord means. When we dwell in the Lord's house, goodness and mercy define our lives. We are no longer individuals asserting our rights to do whatever we wish. Rather, we are sheep who belong to a very exacting shepherd. We are no longer free to stray, because to stray is to court death and despair. We will,

however, rejoice. God our shepherd will not only nurture us and keep us safe, God will lead us to walk on the paths of righteousness where justice, mercy and goodness prevail. God is our shepherd. We shall neither want nor fear. We will dwell with God forever.

Deacon Michelle shared a prayer with us written by Henri Nouwen during the March 24 Lenten service. Please join me now in that prayer.

ALL: Good Shepherd of all, help me to hear your voice of assurance when I am lost and hopeless. Let me find rest and safety in your presence. Though I may be tempted to be full of fear and self-pity, though I may wish to run away from you, please never give up on me. Amen.