

The Lord is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

Communion of Saints

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Sunday, April 23, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

What is God like? I am a guest in your house. I come from a non-Christian culture. I am curious about you. I am curious about your God. Tell me what your God is like?

A frequent answer in the Bible was: God is like a good shepherd.

For the past seven years plus, one of my major responsibilities has been to conduct your funerals. I probably have done nine out of every ten. You who have planned a funeral with me know that I ask, "What scriptures do you want in the service?" The most requested is Psalm 23. Even though we are far away in miles, time and culture from the ancient psalmist, the Shepherd Psalm still moves us. "The Lord is my shepherd."

It was a song. They would have sung it three thousand years ago. That is what the word "Psalm" means. The biblical Book of Psalms in the Old Testament was the ancient hymnal. In our Hymnal are six versions of Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd...

How many of you have seen a shepherd in person? I have been in Jordan twice. Jordan still has shepherds and flocks. If the asphalt paving and the utility lines were erased, I saw scenes that probably matched those seen by King David, the shepherd boy. Today you may see the flock, mixed sheep and goats, maybe thirty of them. The shepherd may be wearing the typical biblical headdress and robe. (But, if you look down, you'll see blue jeans and sneakers.)

The Lord is my shepherd...

Which means that I am one of the shepherd's flock, right? In answering what God is like, logically I have to answer the questions, Who are we? What am I like? In the biblical view, it is not appropriate to talk about God as a stand-alone entity. Nor is it appropriate to talk about ourselves as stand-alone individuals. God is an individual with personality, as are we. You may think of yourself as an individual and independent. But, it is impossible to carry far that self-view. From the moment you came into this world, you were in relationship. Mother birthed you, someone cut the umbilical cord, fed you and changed your diapers. Yes, we are autonomous, but always in relationships. In the biblical teaching, one of the key relationships is with God. We cannot describe God without defining who we are, and the nature of the relationship between God and us.

In ways, we are like sheep and the Lord is like our shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...

What is God like? God is like a shepherd who provides for us. How so?

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

The land was semi-arid. It was normal for the Palestinian hills to be brown from late spring until November. I was in Jordan during April when the grain fields were lush and the rocky hillsides had a blush of green. I was there in early November when the only green was the olive trees, and for miles the land looked like the strip mines did in Pennsylvania when I was young—totally lifeless.

"Green pastures" raises a powerful and pleasant image to the mind of the shepherd and animals. Picture the scene. It is summer. The hills and even the valleys have very little growing. But, the shepherd knows where the greenery is. The sheep depend upon the shepherd to lead them to the green pasture. Without the shepherd, the sheep would have a hard time, even might die of starvation. In early November, I saw flocks grazing, and I could not see anything edible. All I could see was dirt and rock. Up close I saw mini-plants, widely spaced, that the animals could devour. The animals have to walk over miles nibbling at the few hardy tough blades which withstand the searing sun. "Green pastures" brings an "Ahh, so nice" to mind. Feast! If sheep and goats could smile, they would at the thought of lying in green pastures.

This is the image of contentedness in the Lord. All is well with us because the Lord cares for us. People of great faith who walk very closely with the Good Shepherd speak of inner peace and contentment, even as their world is terribly stressful. Beneath the tension, fear, or grieving is an unbroken, unbreakable relationship with God. Of course, the stressors are still present, but present also is the Good Shepherd. Living tests our trust in the Good Shepherd. At times we may focus upon the stressors too much and be shaken at our core. Susceptibility comes from placing so great an emphasis upon other things or experiences that we forget the Shepherd. (What is the three-letter word for this? Sin.) It is not so with people who know the Shepherd!

The Apostle Paul, who knew awful suffering, summarized it this way: If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. Rom. 14:8 That is a reassuring faith!

"He leads me...."

What is the action word? Leads. He leads me beside still waters, and he leads in paths of righteousness. Why did the poet use the verb "leads"?

The Palestinian shepherd did not use woven wire fences, dogs or helicopters to keep his flock together. He led them. The shepherd blew his little pipe or sang a short song. In either case, it was a unique tune used only by him. Hearing his tune, all his sheep and goats would come running to him.

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, Presbyterian missionary in the Near East for decades, told a story from the time when Palestine was under British Mandate and a particular village was causing much trouble. The British rounded up all the animals in the village, about 5000 sheep and goats. A boy came to the British sergeant and asked for his animals, saying, "My father's dead. There is just my mother. Please, Mister, will you not let me have my five goats?" The sergeant was a kind man, but replied, "I really would like to, but there is nothing that I can do. We've five thousand animals in the corral; I could not possibly find your five. When we sort this whole thing out, we can find your goats; but right now, it is hopeless." The boy said, "Open the gate." The sergeant complied. The boy played his little tune on his little pipe and out came his five goats.

The psalmist is saying that God is the Shepherd, and we are the sheep who recognize the Shepherd's tune. That is called faith. That is trust.

We hear the Shepherd's tune in the Bible, the written message of God to us. This is so vital that Protestant worship services are constructed around the reading and interpretation of the Bible. We also hear God's tune in the sacraments. In a few minutes we will be a community around the common table, the flock of Christ around the Lord's Table. As we eat the bread, we say to each other, and to ourselves, Do this remembering me. Remembering him, we are prompted to reflect upon his sacrificial death on the cross to redeem us from our sinful orientation and behavior, and our eternal penalty.

Jesus was quoted by John in his Gospel, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away---and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. John 10:11-15

The Lord Jesus is our caring shepherd, God personified on earth. Jesus cared enough for us to die for us. As you participate in the Supper, listen for the leading tune of our Lord Jesus, the incarnation of the heavenly Good Shepherd.

He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

In that semi-arid climate, dry for so many months, water was scarce and priceless, found in only a few places much of the year. The shepherd led his flock to the water. And the waters needed to be still, because the animals did not like to drink from racing water.

"He restores my soul." I appreciate that quote! But, we have a poor translation. The word 'soul' is a western philosophical word. The Hebrew word means "body and soul" or "my whole person". The New English Bible translates it, "He renews life within me." We might say, "The divine shepherd restores me."

Certainly the restoration of people is one of the works of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and a major purpose of the church.

Why?

We might answer, "because God loves us." But, that is not what the Psalm says. God leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. God does it for God's sake. Most of us are so self-centered in our theology that we forget that God might do something because God wants to do it. God's honor and God's integrity are at stake here. How could God lead us on the wrong path! The divine shepherd guides us in the right path in order to be true to the divine self.

So I would say, "The Shepherd who cares deeply for me is constantly working to restore me to full faith, vitality and service, because that is the shepherd's true self and purpose."

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

This verse is a great comfort for persons in danger and in grief. Those of you who grieve over loved ones and friends who died over the past year, remember: God is with us, no matter what happens! The Lord is my Shepherd.

The rod and staff, what are they? One is the side arm and the other is a tool. The rod was a bludgeon often made from a small tree which was uprooted. The trunk became the handle, and the ball with spikes in it became the business end. It was similar to a policeman carrying a 9 mm.

The staff was a long pole. With it the shepherd reached out and prodded an animal to return to the right path, or pulled down a tree branch to where the animals could nibble the leaves. The staff was a general purpose stick.

I fear no evil; for you are with me. Fear and death. Is there any experience more terrifying than fear and feeling alone? We need allies. Allies give us courage. Friends help the spirit. God is our most committed friend. God is our most loving shepherd. No matter what happens to us, God is still with us!

The Apostle wrote another favorite and powerful passage: Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, pain or persecution? Can lack of clothes and food, danger to life and limb, the threat of force of arms? (To which I add death.) No, in all these things we win an overwhelming victory through him who has proved his love for us. I have become absolutely convinced that...[nothing] in God's whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! Romans 8

In this life and in the life to come, the Lord is our Good Shepherd, and by the grace of the Good Shepherd, we are members of the flock now and always. . . .

What is God like? Faithful companion. Guide to food and water for the soul. Restorer of people. Defensive champion, who in Jesus Christ died for us. God is our Good Shepherd.