

Of Shepherd and Mothers

How many of you know anything about shepherding? The only shepherding I've seen is with horses and dogs. But from what I've heard and read about, there are shepherds in the Middle East who still herd sheep the old way, on foot, and with a crook, which is a stick with a hook at the end. And from what I've read, this old-style shepherding is more like mothering.

These shepherds evidently don't have to crack a whip or blow a whistle. The sheep know the shepherd's voice and will follow as if he were the surrogate mother. Even when herds are mingled, once each shepherd says the word and starts on his way, that shepherd's sheep know his voice and separate off, following that particular shepherd.

Sometimes the shepherd will even name his sheep. The prophet Nathan tells a story in the Old Testament about a family who raised a sheep as if it were a member of their family, the way some people nowadays treat their dogs.

Today's Gospel speaks of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who knows His sheep, leads them, and gives them eternal security. It

also happens to be Mother's Day, a day when we reflect on the nurturing, protective, and sacrificial love of mothers. Though shepherds and mothers may not share the same job description, they share the same heart — a heart that watches, guides, sacrifices, and protects.

I think what is important to remember, though is that not every shepherd was perfect. The same is true with mothers. Not everyone grew up with June Cleaver and the perfectly clean house, wonderful meals on the table, and perfectly coiffed hair. Most of our mothers gave motherhood a good effort, but I want to recognize that not everyone had a great experience. Today, as you remember that, we shall hold you in prayer.

But, for most of us, we can look back or hold our mothers who are still with us, in a place of honor today. Truly, they have raised us, guided us, led us on path of righteousness, fed us, clothed us, and probably put up with a lot of “stuff” of which we were never aware. Shepherds are called upon to the same. They have to make sure the sheep are fed, watered, protected, and, in many ways, nurtured and loved so that they will hear his/her voice and follow along.

Using the image of a Shepherd to describe God was virtually a no-brainer for the people over three thousand years ago. They could certainly relate to shepherds, sheep, and all that went with them. So, when David wrote Psalm 23, it was easy for him to say, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” Scripture scholars believe that it was written when David fled because of Absalom’s rebellion. (Check out the 2nd book of Samuel.) David had crossed the Kidron Valley and the Mount of Olives and moved into the plains of the wilderness. David was emotional about leaving the palace and longed to return to Jerusalem, which is probably why he ended the psalm with “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

I love the text used in the hymn, “Shepherd Me, O God,” by Marty Haugen. Haugen’s interpretation of this hymn is as follows:

“Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.

God is my shepherd, so nothing shall I want,

I rest in the meadows of faithfulness and love,

I walk by the quiet waters of peace.

Gently you raise me and heal my weary soul,

You lead me by pathways of righteousness and truth,

My spirit shall sing the music of your name.

Though I should wander the valley of death,

I fear no evil, for you are at my side,

Your rod and your staff, my comfort and my hope.

You have set me a banquet of love in the face of hatred,

Crowning me with love beyond my power to hold.

Surely your kindness and mercy follow me all the days of my life;

I will dwell in the house of my God forevermore.”

Jesus was able to continue this imagery as a shepherd with his disciples. Again, it was still easy for them as they were accustomed to shepherds. Our reading today is a continuation of the shepherd imagery shared in the earlier verses of the tenth chapter of John’s Gospel. It is there that Jesus tells the disciples, “I am the Good Shepherd.” He goes on to say that he will lay down his life for his sheep.

One scholar writes, “He described the gracious disposition and happy state of his sheep; they heard and believed his word, followed him as his faithful disciples, and none of them should perish; for the Son and the Father were one. Thus he was able to defend his sheep against all

their enemies, which proves that he claimed Divine power and perfection equally with the Father.”

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we are blessed with:

- The knowledge that God is truly our Shepherd and nothing shall we want.
- Jesus truly is our Good Shepherd.
- God is our Father/Mother/Guardian/Parent.

Happy Good Shepherd Sunday! Happy Mothers Day!