

The Good Shepherd

Psalm 23

There is a mythical story about a famous orator from a very small town who had made it big in the world. It was the Parish Fall Festival and the planning committee invited him back as “the local boy who made good”. Since he was famous for his oratorical abilities, they asked him to favor them with a rendition of his skills. He was a bit reluctant, but finally agreed to recite the 23rd Psalm. However, he insisted that he would only do so if after he was done the pastor of the parish would do the same. As you might imagine, this made the pastor more than a little uncomfortable, but being a good sport, he agreed. And so, with all the skills of his art, the orator launched into “The Lord is my shepherd,…” The room grew quiet and hushed, as phrase by phrase with great skill he proclaimed the psalm. When he was done, the people went crazy and applauded and cheered.

Then it was the pastor’s turn. Looking very uncomfortable, he took out his weathered Bible and made his way to the microphone. In a nasally kind of voice, he too, began, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want…” and bit by bit, as his unsteady voice worked its way through the psalm, the room grew very quiet. One by one, the people of the town began to bow their heads. When he was done, there was silence in the room.

The orator quickly took the microphone back, and said into the hushed silence: “That is why I demanded that the pastor read the psalm after I did. Don’t you feel the difference in this room? The reason is simple. I knew that I could lead you to applause, but that your pastor would lead you to prayer. Why? Because I know the 23rd Psalm. Your pastor, he knows the shepherd.”

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” Many of us can’t remember a time when we didn’t know the 23rd Psalm. From childhood, we remember pictures of Jesus with long flowing hair, a shepherd’s crook in his hand, surrounded by peaceful sheep.

We also have heard this Psalm many times at the end of life. “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.” These words describe inevitable realities of life—times we have all had to face and will face again. In the face of grief and loss, the psalmist assures us that God, our Good Shepherd, is always with us.

Often in sermons I have heard sheep portrayed as dumb animals, crowding together in herds, easy prey for wolves. However, Barbara Brown Taylor has a different perspective on sheep. Unlike cattle, who are herded from the rear by cowboys on horse back using fear and coercion to move them forward, sheep prefer to be led. Brown writes, “You push cows, but you lead sheep. Sheep won’t go anywhere without someone walking ahead of them, calling them by name. I learned that sheep become very attached to their shepherd. A stranger walking through a herd of cattle would cause chaos, but the shepherd walking among the sheep wouldn’t cause a stir because sheep know his voice and trust him.”

Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and they know me and I will lay down my life for the sheep.” Jesus goes before us always, leading us to green pastures beside still waters. Jesus keeps us close when we might wander away from the path, looking for a place where the grass seems a little greener.

Unlike other hired shepherds, Jesus also stays near us when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Even there, he went before us, dying on the cross and rising from the dead on Easter, assuring us that he is always with us. He is with us even when we feel forgotten, feel overwhelmed by fear or pain or failure, feel useless because our lives seem to lack purpose or meaning, or when we face danger as Jesus did for bearing witness to God’s saving truth. He is with us even when we must face our own death.

Sometimes we doubt whether we are good enough to deserve God’s love. We all have strayed from the path on which Jesus would lead us. But as best as I can tell there are no qualifications for being in the flock, only a willingness to listen for Jesus’ voice. We even know that Scripture tells us that each one of us is so important to God that the Good Shepherd never hesitates to leave the whole flock in order to search for one lost sheep.

In the 23rd Psalm we hear that God prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies, a table where Jesus, our Good Shepherd, offers us his body and blood to give us faith and courage to listen for his voice and to follow him all the days of our lives. Jesus longs for us all to live in his presence and he promises us comfort and courage to walk the path we all must walk. Come, feed on him today at this table he has prepared for us, a foretaste of the heavenly feast to come. Listen for his voice that tells you and me, “This is my body, my blood, given for you! Hear his promise to walk with you today and all the days of your life. Hear and believe him when he says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

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