

The Good Shepherd

When I was a little boy, I had in my bedroom a picture of Jesus. It portrayed him as the good shepherd, with sheep gathered around his feet. What I will always remember about this picture was printed in luminous ink so that it glowed in the dark. I suppose that someone had given it to me as a comforting night light for a kid who was afraid of the dark.

Our psalm this morning is probably the best-known scripture passage next to the Lord's prayer. "The Lord is my shepherd" are words which are heard at nearly every funeral service, and many people who are unchurched or even unbelievers know this short psalm by heart. The problem is that it is so familiar that even we churchgoers often rush through it by rote, missing out on some rich treasure to be found here in just these 6 short verses.

So, this morning I would like to do something a little unusual and preach not the Gospel but on the psalm; to take a deeper dive into what is perhaps the most beautiful and compact statement of our faith to be found anywhere in the Bible.

There are a few obstacles of language and imagery we must get past. We 21st century urbanites have not spent much time around sheep, and even fewer of us understand what it means to be a shepherd. Those of you who have experienced ranch life know that sheep are not the brightest of animals, nor are they known for their personal hygiene. So, when the Bible compares us to stupid and smelly sheep, as will happen a lot in the lessons appointed in church for the next few weeks, I for one have a hard time not feeling somewhat offended! As for shepherds, we are usually under the mistaken notion that being shepherd means getting to stand around in some bucolic meadow, enjoying taking in the scenery and enjoying the summer breeze. In fact, being a shepherd is an exhausting task. A Navajo boy once told me how he would help his grandfather herd sheep on the reservation. "You had to push and shove those sheep all day, their bleating drives you crazy, and all the time you have to watch for coyotes which are always waiting to ambush the little ones. You can't let your attention flag for a split second!

So, when the psalmist begins by saying "the Lord is my shepherd," he is not thinking of a comfy sentimental nursery scene. He describes the Lord as a strong vigilant shepherd who gives us his presence and protection every second of our lives. Is there a modern equivalent of a shepherd? I once asked my congregation that question. The answer? Probably someone like a coach--who works with us, believes in us, and protects us and always wants the best for us.

And because we have such a faithful shepherd (or coach,) "we shall not want," or "we shall not lack." Interesting grammar here. There is no object in this sentence. What is it that we lack--nothing?

Our relationship with God is not only our highest goal, but also really our only goal. When God is with us, we need nothing else. And what is even more wonderful, as the sheep of God's pasture, we don't have to do anything to earn his attention. In one of the words of one preacher. "All we are asked to do is to be God's sheep. There is no pressure to be better, more inventive, productive, strong, or independent. All we are asked to do is to listen to the voice of the shepherd." 1)

As some of you know, I am particularly interested in those men and women who are called mystics. Before Covid, I gave a little class here at St Andrews on women medieval mystics.

The more I learned about people like Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, and Theresa of Avila, the more intrigued I became. Mystics are often characterized as being navel gazers out of touch with reality, living in woo-woo land. Not so! The goal of a mystic is to enjoy an unmediated relationship with God, to be aware of God's presence in every aspect of life. That sounds easy and, in a way, it is, but in pursuing that goal we often get distracted by those things that are supposed to help us experience union with the divine. Even in church we can get weighed down by the institution of the church and spend all our time and energy focusing on churchy things instead of Godly things. We start to major in minors. The mystics remind us of what we are really here for. Just like the psalmist. They make the main thing the main thing. The main thing of course is living close to God, our shepherd, and our coach, and as Christians we have a means to that end, Jesus himself. For as one scholar puts it: "The incarnation makes mystics of us all...for in Jesus the abyss between the divine and the human is reduced to zero." 2)

It's good to know that just as we have a goal of being with God, God has a goal for us. We skip to the end of the psalm to hear it--that goal is that we might "dwell in the house of the Lord forever." In other words, God's presence is more than a quick pick me up, a temporary comfort. The sheep live in leisure, "they lie down in green pastures, they go beside still waters "because they have a future. They can enjoy today because there is a tomorrow, because of their hope in the future, they can live in the present.

But that present we live in often contains darkness and "the shadow of death." No wonder this psalm is used so much at funerals. Because God is with us in everything, we need not fear anything. God is not just a life preserver or a safe space. God is an active defense against evil. And he has the weapons to prove it. "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." When I was bishop and hence symbolically chief shepherd of this diocese, I got used to carrying around a rod or a staff. It's called a crozier, and it is what shepherds carry. (A child at a Confirmation service once asked me if I was Little Bo Peep!) It not only has a hook at one end for pulling wayward sheep back into the fold, but it also has a point on the other end for fending off wolves. Our good shepherd Jesus is not just a comforter, he is also our defender. Good to know when we feel up against the forces of evil in this world!

Now look at an interesting change at v. 4. Here the writer makes his main point--" YOU ARE WITH ME." These words come at the exact middle of the psalm-- as many lines

come after them as before. "YOU ARE WITH ME." The psalmist switches from talking about God to talking with God, the subject changes from He to You. And the "you" is no longer a shepherd but a host or an innkeeper. "You set a table before me; you anoint my head." These are the actions of a welcoming and generous middle eastern host. In that culture, when one is invited to sit at table and eat, it is the same as being made part of the family. The oil of anointing is refreshing, and balm poured over the guest's head and feet--a sign of acceptance and safety. And a table, well who would say know to a sumptuous buffet? These are all images of abundance. The host is overwhelmingly welcoming, just like the shepherd is overwhelmingly caring.

With this kind of hospitality from God, we can eat and relax, even in the presence of our enemies. This is a good reminder that our relationship with God is not an escape hatch from the problems of the world. We are still going to face enemies--grief, anxiety, pain, and death. But we can enjoy the abundance of God even in the midst of all that, for we know that God is always present, always protecting, always guiding, always providing the things we need.

And that thought brings us to the climax and conclusion of this great psalm. It won't be our enemies who are nipping at our heels--it's not them, but rather the good things which will pursue us in this life and the life to come. "Surely Goodness and Mercy shall follow me all days of my life."

There it is, just six verses, the fundamentals of our faith summed up. And fundamentals are important, even more so in these days when like the psalmist we are beset by fears about our health, our environment, our country, and our world. When we get distracted by all those challenges, it is easy to forget the fundamentals. One of my relatives who is a retired women's basketball coach told me that when her team was fighting for a championship, their discipline would often start to fall about from the pressure in that final game. They would forget everything they learned in practice and would start to panic. Then she said, what I needed to do was to yell at them from the sidelines--don't forget the basics--keep your hands up! Don't foul! Don't hog the ball! Those are the elements of basketball. And the 23rd Psalm is the element of our faith: God is with you; you don't need anything else! God will take care of you, don't be afraid! Heaven awaits, don't lose heart!

Jesus is our good shepherd and our generous host. And the words of the 23rd psalm are even more comforting than that glowing picture in a dark bedroom. These words we can live by and die by.

1) Edwin Van Driel in Feasting on the Word (Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville, 2009) III, 252.

2) Vincent Pizzuto, Contemplating Christ: The Gospels and The Interior Life (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2018), p. 12.