

GOOD SHEPHERD / GOOD STEWARD

Psalm 23; John 10: 11-18; April 25, 2021; Union Cong. United Church of Christ

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There are so many reasons not to preach a sermon about Psalm 23. It is poetry – lovely poetry with all the power of poetry. It is almost too familiar. It's rhythm, pacing, cadence, and feel are almost more important than the words. It is also true that its familiarity can cause readers and listeners to lose or miss the very essence of the words and ideas contained in the Psalm.

Images of shepherds – good and bad – permeate our scriptures – in the Psalms, in the prophets, in the early stories of the Old Testament, and Jesus in the Gospels. The image of shepherd was meant to convey feelings of a compassionate, caring, loving, responsible caregiver and leader.

Because many of us are not as familiar with the day to day realities of shepherding, when we think of shepherding, we may immediately leap to romanticized images of fluffy, white, prancing and dancing lambs. We forget about the vast quantities of manure, the dank smell of wet sheep, the cacophony of hungry sheep, the hopeless devastation when lambs don't survive, the frustration of sheep who stray or get lost.

Holding tightly to our image of Jesus as Good Shepherd leads us to that famous painting of the 'white Jesus' – an image of a very Scandinavian looking, blond, blue eyed Jesus snuggling a fluffy, contented white baby lamb. And that may not be – is not - the most accurate image of what it means to be a good shepherd. A job description for Good Shepherd may not be what we think.

Perhaps it would be helpful to reimage Psalm 23 with alternative contemporary leadership roles instead of shepherd as we did at last week's Bible Study.

God is my Therapist. I have fewer needs. You calm my thoughts and help me rest. You refresh my attitude. You guide me. Even when I feel surrounded by negativity, I feel no panic for you are with me. Your words and advice comfort me. You give me tools for self-care in the presence of harmful times. You bless me with abilities and my assurance overflows. Only peace, love and calm will follow me all my days and you will always be with me. (Gigi Nauer)

YHWH you are my travel guide in a foreign land. You teach me things I did not know. You show me worlds I have not seen. You give me peace by making me different than I was before I met you. You open up the world of the future and give me the courage to embrace new places. You take me on paths I would not dare to go on my own. You do not judge my inexperience and my careless steps. You do all this with quietness and kindness that gives me peace. (John Olson)

God you are my peace-keeper – police - upholder of the law – your law of love. You are the one who keeps me safe – and my neighbors safe – no matter our color or race or sexual orientation or gender. You lead me in paths of justice for everyone and everything. You give me rest because you know how much I need rest or I cannot go on. You are with me when I am discouraged or disheartened. Even in the most difficult of times, you give me hope. You encourage me to come to the table shared with so many others and eat healthy food. You encourage me to share what I have. You anoint me with love and continue to love me even when I fall short – and for that I am forever grateful. (Rev Robin Raudabaugh)

So often in our culture, we confuse wants with needs. We may be tempted to think of Psalm 23 much like a kid writing a letter to Santa Clause – “I’m counting on you Santa Clause to respond to me, because I’ve heard so many stories about who you are. I’ve been pretty good this year - and here’s my list of what I want.”

But God as Santa Clause and we the kids that believe or want to believe - isn’t really it, is it? The very second line in the Psalm reminds us that because God is our Shepherd, we shall not want. It is because we recognize God as a Good Shepherd that we know we need not want. We can rely that what we need – food, water, rest and restoration, safety from evil, comfort, and goodness and mercy can be ours as we abide with God our whole lives.

The provision of God – God providing us with all we need – is placed between these two – wants and needs - by using the term ‘shall follow me.’ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me my whole life long. Surely God will follow me as closely as my shadow. Surely God will pursue and rescue me when I stray, when I get lost. Surely, just like the one sheep lost and the ninety-nine that did not get lost, God will never give up on me, but will pursue me until once again, I am found and safe with the flock once again.

What I want - that I often go off looking for in all the wrong places – and what I need - all that God helps me to provide for myself and others - is discerned by a good shepherd.

Shepherding, providing therapy, coaching, peace-keeping, and guiding are not necessarily idyllic occupations. These jobs are often filled with anxiety about providing the best information and care. They require fortitude and steadfastness. They require patience and perseverance. They require compassion and challenge. It is true that knowing God as Good Shepherd or Jesus as Good Shepherd is meant to be comforting – and it should be – and it is also true that the comfort provided is not just for me or you – it is meant for everyone. However, that promise of comfort does not give us permission to be lazy about enjoying our comfort. We are made comfortable to remind us how much we enjoy comfort and to give us a place to come back to when times are difficult or when we are walking through the darkest valley or the places where evil assails us on all sides. The comfort God provides reminds us too that sometimes sadly, we are the ones making others lives dark valleys or places of evil – either overtly and intentionally or unintentionally through our systems and laws that perpetuate such evil and oppression.

The image of Good Shepherd gives us examples for good leadership that is responsible, compassionate, justice based, unconditionally loving, willing to step out of the place of comfort to provide safety and security for someone or something else.

Right now, what do we need – what do we need from our Good Shepherd? I'm not asking what do we want – because of course we want God to smite the evildoers. We want God to make it impossible to tell anything but the truth. We want God to provide equity for all people everywhere. We want God to save our planet. We want, want, want.

But God doesn't work like that. God works through us. God gives us what we need – not necessarily what we want. God gives us the ability to provide food for everyone. God gives us brains to obtain and use our knowledge to grow sustainably, to eat responsibly, to waste little. God enables us to provide clean water for everyone by ensuring our water supply remains untainted by harmful farm chemical runoff, mining effluent, trash and waste.

God provides us with the ability to follow along right paths – choosing what is right and good, what is true and trustworthy, what provides justice for all – choosing not to believe the lies of false shepherds and leaders. God protects us in the darkest of times: giving us the wisdom to wear masks, to social distance, to wash our hands regularly, to vaccinate. God gives us wisdom to make and enact and uphold good laws – that are helpful and equitable for everyone – regardless of color, race, gender or sexual identity. God promises us goodness and mercy – both from others and from ourselves. God promises to be with us – to pursue us when we get lost – and as we dwell with God our whole lives. And God works with us to provide all these things.

I close by sharing these words from Maren Tirabassi, liturgical writer and pastor, written for Good Shepherd Sunday and Earth Day.

God makes us shepherds and gardeners, so none of God's relations – creatures, growing things, land, water, wind, sky --- need be in want.

God gives us lying down places of green pasture, rainforest, delta, desert, high mountain, deep canyon, and paths by arroyo, deep river, waterfall, ocean shore, and these refresh our souls.

Creator leads us to care, not from duty but from love.

Though we pass chemically poisoned fields, over-fished seas, the violence of fracking, mountaintop removal coal mining, the terrible tears of the valley of extinction, when we join the weeping, we no longer fear.

God sets a global table – in spite of the overturned ones of corporate influence, money, political power. God anoints us with community, teaches us with overflowing wells.

Surely we follow with committed people of goodness and mercy, from Chico Mendes to Greta Thunberg, and so many, so many more.

Where we dwell now is God's house. Forever is in our hands.