

Good Shepherd Sunday
May 3, 2020
Vicar Kimberly

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

I love reading that passage in particular in the King James Version. The language is so beautiful and poetic. None of the newer translations have quite the same feel. When I am called to the bedside of a dying patient in the hospital, I read this version. It is so comforting to think of a shepherd watching over and caring for all of us like sheep.

Two of my favorite hymns are derived from this passage.

The King of Love My Shepherd Is written by Henry Williams Baker in 1868
Shepherd Me, O God by Marty Haugen in 1986

This seems like the perfect time to focus on Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The whole world is experiencing grief on a large scale. Some people are grieving the loss of loved ones. Some are grieving the loss of businesses or jobs. Some are grieving time with friends and family. We are even grieving our religious practices. Christians are having to adjust how we commemorate Easter. Jews had to do that with Passover. And Muslims will need to have their biggest Eid, the celebration to end Ramadan on May 23 physically separated from family and friends also. I don't think there is anyone that hasn't been affected in some way.

But, most people, especially Muslims wouldn't understand if we tell them that the Good Shepherd is watching over them. Like us they have metaphors for God, but shepherd isn't one of them. I've read articles in which Muslims are figuratively shaking their heads at us for that one. For one thing, sheep are stupid and dirty. Most people don't want to see themselves that way. For another thing Shepherds, themselves, are historically uneducated, they are often considered sinners that must work through the Sabbath and prayer times, and they smell like sheep. Muslims already think we're weird for believing God became a human, but then to suggest that God would be a shepherd is taking it even farther.

I actually think, it is a good thing to hear that criticism. I think in Christianity, with our pretty hymns and lovely paintings, we have lost perspective on what a shepherd is. The image of Jesus with fair skin, flowing hair and robes, gracefully walking down a path barefoot with a pretty little lamb on his shoulders loses the key component that makes Christianity unique. We believe that God was incarnated as a baby – birthed in the usual messy manner. He cried and

sweated and bled. When Jesus refers to himself as a shepherd he doesn't only mean as a caretaker for us. He means he is immersed in our stupid and our stink.

That leads me to the question: what metaphor would Jesus use, if he was talking to us today? Most of us don't know any modern-day shepherds and, even if we did, I don't think that shepherding is quite the same anyway. In Jesus's day sheep were a major source of food, clothing, and religious practices. The examples we have of shepherds in scripture are women (like Rachel the beloved wife of Jacob) and youth (like David before he became king). There also are some that are hired hands. They had to work day and night, on weekends and holidays. Everyone depended on them, but they were considered just one-step above slaves – actually some of them were slaves.

When I think about a contemporary example of people that are key to our community. The people that feed us, but aren't paid nearly to the level that our dependence on them warrants. I think of the migrant workers that pick the produce on farms. I think of the employees of meat packing plants. And I think of the grocery store clerks. These are some of the lowest paid employees in our nation. I think, if Jesus showed up today, he would use them as an example of the shepherds in our world. Many of them are women, young people, immigrants, and people with special needs. They are not paid very well or respected the way other professions are. But, when it came down to what jobs were essential enough to continue going during a pandemic with stay at home orders for the rest of us, they kept on going. Most people I know wouldn't have access to staples, fresh produce, or even meat without the grocery store employees.

In John chapter 10, Jesus talks about thieves and bandits coming ahead of him and trying to lead the sheep astray. If Jesus is the good grocery worker, then who are the thieves and bandits in our contemporary metaphor? The very last verse of the gospel reading is the most important for interpreting the passage and applying it to our lives. In verse 10, Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." When I look for Jesus in the world, I look to the people that are life-giving. It has been only in this pandemic that I have come to realize how dependent I am on grocery store employees. Alternatively, the pandemic has also brought to light some of those that do the opposite. They aren't making our lives more abundant nor do they seem to care much about protecting lives at all.

My first thought would be the protestors that are disregarding public safety rules – the people not wearing masks or maintaining appropriate physical distancing when getting in the faces of police officers and government employees. I definitely believe Jesus would have some tough words for those showing up with guns play acting as military. When actual national guard service members are working to care for the sick and distribute food. But, to remain true to the scriptural context, Jesus seems to have been talking to religious leaders that used religious sounding words and reasoning to oppress people. That's the kind of thing that really got under his skin. In that case, the thieves and the bandits would be faith leaders that are manipulating followers to attend church under the misguided idea that God will protect them from getting sick.

Very few of us fall into either the category of thief or shepherd. Disagreeing with the governor's orders, hating to wear a mask, or grieving over the changes to our lives during this pandemic are *not* stealing, killing, or destroying our community. Being upset about what is

going on doesn't make you a menace to society. Most of us are the sheep looking for good shepherds to keep us safe even when we aren't very happy about how it's being done. I also know that some of you are essential workers going out to work each day. I want you to know I see Jesus in you. Jesus's life was endangered by working for the good of his people – for feeding his sheep. I will do a better job from now on, appreciating that your work makes our lives more abundant.

I like to use verses like John 10:10 to help me make decisions about how to be a sheep in this world. Does it make you uncomfortable to think of yourself as sheep in this world? I don't like it very much. I want to think I'm in control of what I do and what happens to me. In recent years, people on both the right and the left have taken to calling people on the other side "sheeple" meaning people that thoughtlessly follow leaders that are clearly manipulating them. But, the truth is that we are all sheep in the eyes of God. We were created to be dependent on each other and at the mercy of other people all the time – like the government making our current laws, the grocery workers stocking the shelves, and many others. So, how are we, as sheep, going to decide who to follow.

Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." It is subjective, I know. But, we, as sheep, must look for shepherds that give life and give it abundantly. Some people interpret that to mean leaders who help us get a Mercedes in the driveway and a lush 401K. Those things aren't bad, but Jesus didn't live his life in the pursuit of material things. And often, when we prioritize getting *things*, we end up in competition with others instead of working for our mutual abundant life. That is the abundant life that Jesus preached – strong community, caring for one another and being cared for. Anyone that tells us otherwise is a thief coming to steal and kill and destroy.

This week we all found out that the Haimert Center sale didn't go through. That is very disappointing. It is yet another thing to cause fear and grief - another thing ruined by the coronavirus. It's ok to sit with it for a little while and be mad or sad. But, I also would say to you that Ascension is Christ's church. It is the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd. And whether you want to think of the Good Shepherd as the One who guards over us to protect us from the thieves and the bandits, or if you want to think of the Good Shepherd as the one who is in the mess with us providing the sustenance we all need, be aware that God will provide for Her ministry to be done in the Northland area. This is a setback – not a loss. Keep doing the work that God has called you to do. We are working on amending the goals for 2020 to reflect the new reality, but we aren't throwing them out.

The coming weeks and months are going to be full of hard choices. Seek out the voices of people that want abundant life – not just for individuals, but for our community as a whole. Psalm 23 is most often found at death beds and funerals – the end of things. It is because, for those of us that know this world is temporary, it gives us a place to rest and wait for what is next. It feels like all the world is holding its breath right now waiting to see what is to come. Psalm 23 tells us to rest. God is right here with us restoring our souls and leading us in the paths of righteousness. And when we get through this valley of the shadow of death, we will feast together again with the Shepherd.

Let's close with the same words we began this morning:

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