

The Good Shepherd

Psalm 23

John 10: 11-18

May 3, 2009 - UM

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

There are probably no words that are more familiar to Christian people as the words of the 23rd psalm.

How many of you can recite it?

And is it the King James Version?

Listen as Nancy and share a litany on the 23rd psalm:

A LITANY ON PSALM 23

L: The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

P: I shall not want anything but my shepherd. My shepherd is strong, and wise and wonderful; my shepherd loves me, in spite of my faults, and even the sin and selfishness that beset me. My shepherd loves me even when I don't particularly love myself. My shepherd loves me for who I am. When I am tired and weary...

L: He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

P: In the lush, soft grass, I rest, and my shepherd stands guard over my thoughts so no disturbing ones enter in. I let go of my burdens and cares. I am still, and know that my shepherd is God. When I am rested and refreshed, ready to continue my journey

L: He leadeth me beside still waters.

P: I sit there in the quiet of the evening and see the sun sink behind the hills. In that golden hour, my heart finds peace, my striving ceases and I surrender to the will of my shepherd, and now...

L: He restoreth my soul.

P: Yes, my shepherd takes my hand and holds it fast while we walk past the many forks in the road. How easily I would have chosen the wrong one had my shepherd not been with me. But...

L: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

P: It is a narrow path ... but, oh, so beautiful! The birds sing in the early morning while the grass is wet with dew. The sun shines and the air is fresh and pure. If I let go of my shepherd's hand and wander off and get lost in the deep forest of wilderness,

L: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

P: My shepherd will seek me and find me, and when I grow weary and faint, and falter in the way because fear chokes me and my vision fails me as the shadows grow deeper and deeper - then I remember...

L: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

P: They protect me as I go on this journey of life.

L: Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies,

P: Whose names are: fear, worry, selfishness, insecurity, low self-esteem. When they see me drink of gladness and joy and eat of perfect peace, they leave me, and then

L: Thou anointest my head with oil.

P: The gentleness of the shepherd's hands almost makes my heart burst asunder with happiness, and yes, oh, yes,

L: My cup runneth over.

P: It is too full ... I have room for no more. There is no limit to the abundance of gifts which the good shepherd bestows on me. The gifts are from the best in the land. I shall never be lonely, for my shepherd gives me companions.

L: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life

P: And as we walk along together ... one day ... at dusk ... I shall come to a bend in the road. I shall stop, and far off in the distance I shall see a place I cannot describe, eternal in the heavens. And only the single eye of the soul can see it. I shall bow down and worship, and as I walk silently toward it, my heart will leap with gladness ... a thousand stars spring into place. All the song birds of earth sing, and the little children laugh, and their laughter echoes back through God's heaven into the angelic chorus of the saints. I have forgotten my yesterdays, and all the many tomorrows, because I shall enter,

L: And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever! Amen! (*Author Unknown*)

Psalm 23 is one which is often read at funerals...

The image of God who cares for each one of us intimately and satisfies our every need so that we want for absolutely nothing is one that brings great comfort in times of distress.

Here in Nova Scotia, even in Halifax, we are still close enough to the land, and farming that this metaphor of the Good shepherd still speaks to us...

We have seen sheep!

But there are many people, who live in cities, or in northern parts of the country that have never seen a sheep and simply can't relate to it.

Jim Taylor, a United Church layperson and writer said this, "After a day of chasing through shopping malls, Psalm 23 took on a new significance."

And he wrote this:

God keeps a cool cafe. What more could I ask?

She provides a comfortable chair to take the weight off my weary feet; She puts up an umbrella to shade me from the sun; She serves me iced tea.

Though I have battled with the crowds at the bargain counters, though I have suffered the scent of too many sweaty bodies, I don't care.

I know what's waiting for me at the end of the day. An ice cream cone. It drips over the edges, and I lick it up gratefully.

I close my eyes; The sound system plays the gentle chuckles of waves lapping on a shore.

I am content. I would love to sit here forever.

In God's cool cafe.

He is doing what the writers of both the psalm and our reading from the gospel of John did... writing about everyday things that their readers would have been familiar.

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, takes the Psalms, Proverbs and New Testament and rewrites them in contemporary language.

He still uses the imagery of the shepherd, but in today's language. This is his version of the 23rd Psalm:

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side.

Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies.

You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.

I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

Each of those versions, the one in language from the time of King James, the contemporary language one and the one which uses an entirely different image have essentially the same message:

God cares for us, guides us, feeds us, leads in the right paths and we ultimately make our home with God.

This message and imagery is picked up in the reading from John, but with a significant difference: the writer of John's gospel has shifted the image of God as the shepherd to Jesus as the shepherd.

In effect, God with skin on!

This shepherd will not desert us in times of trouble, will not desert us in times of terror, will not desert us in times of sorrow or sickness or death or destruction or economic insecurity...

This shepherd cares for us, protects us and guides us.

This shepherd is present all the days of our lives...

Thanks be to God, amen.

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