

The Good Shepherd

Psalm 23 / John 10: 11-18

Let me acknowledge right up front that this is less a well-crafted sermon complete with focus and function statements and more a somewhat random assortment of thoughts and ideas and quotes that have come to me in connection to this morning's Scripture passages. You know how you reach into a bag of Scrabble tiles and pull out a bunch of letters that you then try to turn into something sensible? I'm a little less organized than that this morning, but I have every confidence that the Holy Spirit can move through even the most disorganized moments and breathe the wind of God's mercy, grace, justice, and peace into every heart and mind that is open to receive. We might think of these next few minutes as something of a "do it yourself theology kit", where I toss you the equivalent of some Scrabble sermon tiles and invite each of you to mentally assemble them into a meaningful message, with extra points available if you can put them into an interlocking grid.

So -- first sermon tile: Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. It is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, which the lectionary designates as Good Shepherd Sunday each year. Every Eastertide, on this day, we are directed to read Psalm 23, because -- let's be honest here -- no matter how many times we have heard Psalm 23, we are always happy to hear it again. That beloved Scripture is paired in each of the lectionary years with verses from John's Gospel that pick up the psalm's metaphor and refer to Jesus as our shepherd. Today, we have turned to the tenth chapter of John's Gospel, where Jesus says of himself "I am the good shepherd" and then offers a description of what sort of goodness characterizes his care of the flock.

We who have no personal experience of shepherding often romanticize it, emphasizing the bucolic setting of green meadows and rushing streams rather than the hard and dangerous work of keeping sheep fed and safe in ancient Israel, a country where green meadows and rushing streams were not the norm, but predators were. Jesus reminds us that a shepherd who is committed to the task will stand between the sheep and any approaching threat. Jesus reminds us that *he* is committed to the task of facing any wolf that seeks to claim us away from him.

Second sermon tile: A pastor named Liz Goodman wrote a commentary on Psalm 23 that pondered the nuanced meaning of the psalmist's claim: *The Lord is my shepherd / I shall not want*. Goodman points out that we usually understand "I shall not want" as communicating the idea that: "I trust that I shall be provided for"; but it can also mean "I am and will remain content with what I have." The Inclusive Bible translation that Mike read this morning gets at that interpretation by rendering the first verse as *Lord, you are my shepherd -- I want nothing more*. Goodman writes that raising her young sons in a rural area in a home without cable TV meant that they were unencumbered by information about or desire for Power Rangers or Matchbox cars or any of the many, many products which our consumerist society so constantly tries to convince us we need.

Her story reminded me of an experience from early in my oldest son's life. Jason and I were frequent visitors to a mall near our home; sometimes we went to shop, but more often we went to simply walk through the mall's wide, air-conditioned corridors. One of those corridors contained a couple of kiddie rides -- a brown horse; a red car.

Jason especially loved the horse and our walks through the mall always included that particular hallway so he could spend some time sitting tall and proud on the horse's back, surveying the landscape from a perch that seemed impossibly high and unbelievably exciting. Mind you -- it was a stationary perch because, while that horse was a ride with a coin slot, I never put any money into the coin slot and it never occurred to Jason that his horseback time could be any more exciting and wonderful than it already was. Until one black and terrible day when we turned the corner into that mall corridor and another child -- one whose mother was either kinder or more foolish than I -- sat high atop that horse -- and the horse *was moving up and down*.

Jason had never wanted more from that brown molded horse statue than to sit on its high strong back overseeing the realm around him. But once he knew there *was* more, a stationary sit was not enough and he desperately, desperately wanted something he had previously lived quite happily without.

It can be easy to look around and see more clearly what we don't have than what we do. It can be easy to put a lot of energy into wanting. It is freeing to say with the psalmist: *Lord you are my shepherd -- I want nothing more.* I don't need to pay the shiny horse to move up and down.

Sermon tile number three: the English language does not distinguish between a single sheep and multiple sheep.

Sermon tile number four: I learned recently that there is an unfortunate but ubiquitous mistranslation of the final verse of the 23rd Psalm. That change in vocabulary has impacted our understanding of this psalm through many generations.

In that last verse, we read "Only goodness and love will follow me" in the Inclusive Bible or "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me" in several other translations, but those renderings shift the meaning of the statement by using a verb that does not reflect the intent of the original language.

What the psalmist wrote and sang and prayed in the original Hebrew is better translated as "only goodness and mercy shall **pursue** me all the days of my life".

Eugene Peterson gets at this with his translation in *The Message* where he renders the psalm's final verse as: *Your beauty and love chase after me / every day of my life.*

"Follow" is a reactive verb.

"Pursue" or "chase" makes clear that the initiative comes -- as it always does -- from God.

Commentator Bobby Morris writes that "God's goodness and mercy never simply follow at a distance, and certainly don't maintain some kind of holding pattern until we breathe our last. Instead, God's goodness and mercy 'pursues' us, actively seeking to engage us and refresh our lives. In addition, God's goodness and mercy does this 'all the days of my life.'" (*Working Preacher* website)

We might note that "pursue" is somewhat aggressive language. A predator pursues its prey. When we apply that lens to this psalm, we realize that what the psalmist proclaims is that, in a world full of purveyors of suffering and death, he is not under threat from any of them, for he is pursued **only** by the goodness and the mercy of God, the shepherd who cares for his every need and protects him from every danger.

Final sermon tile: Marilyn McEntyre, author of the wonderful book *When Poets Pray*, brings a careful sensitivity to language to her consideration of the opening line of Psalm 23. She points out that a change of emphasis shifts that line's rich message:

The *Lord* is my shepherd: no one else cares for me as my Lord does. There may be others who think they can occupy that role, but I know the one who cares for me.

The Lord *is* my shepherd: this is not a historical statement. In this very moment, I am being shepherded and cared for.

The Lord *is my* shepherd: the one who shepherds me is immanently, intimately present; has created me, chosen me, and loved me with a love that will not let me go.

The Lord *is my shepherd*: there may be other metaphors that teach us about God, but this one offers its own valuable, irreplaceable teaching. Shepherds watch. They guard. They fight off predators. They laugh at sheep's stupidities and love them anyway. God is a shepherd, and this is good news indeed.

So -- there you have this morning's not-quite-a-sermon. I hope that something in this grab-bag of images and ideas about our Good Shepherd has spoken to you. I hope that you will go into this week confident that you are indeed in the care of the One who knows and meets our every need. The One who chases us with beauty and love, goodness and mercy so that we might dwell forever in the house of our Lord.

Amen.