

The LORD is My Shepherd

I hope the scripture I have just read is a familiar one to you. Along with two other sections from the 10th chapter of the Gospel According to John in which Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd, it is featured in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary every fourth Sunday of Easter along with the 23rd Psalm. As a result, this fourth Sunday of Eastertide is often known as Good Shepherd Sunday, a title with a certain amount of resonance for this church, I hope. Since I became your pastor 10 years ago, I have always tried to pay special attention to this Sunday. If we are going to call ourselves by a name, we ought to be well versed in what it means, don't you think?

In years past, I've dug into one or the other of these passages from John or the accompanying readings from Acts or the Old Testament or the epistles or even Psalm 23 itself, doing my best to exegete each of those passages for you, making connections to their context, unpacking words, phrases and ideas that have become obscure for us due to distance from their writing in time and space. This morning, though, I want to take more of a survey approach, using some of the familiar passages as well as some that don't get studied or preached as often. Again, though, the questions I hope to answer are what did it mean for the writers or figures in these Biblical passages to imagine God as their shepherd? How can we understand those ideas from our modern perspective? And what, if any, calling does the idea of the Good Shepherd put on us?

I want to start with two passages that may be very obscure indeed for most of us, passages from near the end of Genesis. The story in Genesis chapters 48 & 49 is of the end of the life of one of that book's primary protagonists: the patriarch Jacob, also known as Israel. When we remember Jacob today, it's generally as the last of the triad named in a formula commonly used to identify the God of Christians and Jews; that is, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (or, if like me you try to be gender-inclusive in your description, the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and Leah and Rachel). You may remember one or more of the most famous stories about Jacob – that he was a twin and was born clutching the heel of his older brother; that his older brother, Esau (that hairy man), sold Jacob his birthright for a “mess of pottage,” that is, a bowl of stew, and that their mother then helped Jacob deceive his old, blind father into giving him the blessing reserved for the older son; that in fleeing from his older brother's murderous wrath, he had a dream about God's angels descending from and ascending to heaven, the basis of our folk song, “We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder;” that he himself was tricked into marrying Leah, the older sister of his true love, Rachel; that he wrestled with the angel of God and was given the name Israel; that he had twelve sons, the eleventh of whom was Joseph, he of Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat fame.

It is this last that sets up the story I want to look at in part today. You may recall that Joseph, having been sold into slavery by his brothers, who despise him as their father's pet, ends up in Egypt and does so well for himself that he becomes right-hand man to Pharaoh. When famine devastates the region, Canaan as well as Egypt, Jacob sends his ten oldest sons to Egypt to buy grain where they encounter Joseph, who, after tricking them, reveals himself to them and invites them to bring their father and all their families and goods to Egypt to ride out the famine under his protection. After initial reservations, they do so and, in the normal course of things, it becomes clear that Jacob Israel has lived out his days and is nearing death. He asks Joseph to bring his two sons for their grandfather's blessing and then gives his dying blessings to each of his own twelve.

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Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons is found in chapter 48. Perhaps remembering his own "stolen" blessing, he deliberately reverses the boys' birth order in blessing them and Joseph objects but that's a story for another day. The operative passage this morning is the one in which he gives a general blessing to both boys: "Jacob blessed Joseph, and said, "The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth." This is, in the reading order of the Bible, the first time that God is compared to a shepherd.

The second time comes just one chapter later. Now Jacob has called together his twelve sons to give each of them his parting blessing. When he comes to Joseph, his favorite, he repeats some of what he had said in regard to Joseph's sons: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall. The archers fiercely attacked him; they shot at him and pressed him hard. Yet his bow remained taut, and his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, by the God of your father, who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb." These passages are the earliest in the salvation history of Israel, the people named for the man who is credited with these words, to name God as Shepherd.

I think it's significant to look at what else the man called Israel says about this God whom he names as Shepherd. Jacob first reminds Joseph that he speaking of the God followed by Abraham and Isaac. They are, in other words, in the midst of passing on the promises made to Abraham by God and reaffirmed to both Isaac and to Jacob. In giving first place to this reference to God as the One who made covenants with Abraham and his family, Jacob indirectly names an attribute of God which would have been very important to him: God is Promise Keeper. Jacob, after all, knows about promises, good and bad, fulfilled and broken. He had supplanted his brother Esau in their father's blessing in part due to a promise he'd extracted from Esau when his brother was hungry. Jacob himself had experienced a broken promise when Laban, his uncle, promised him Laban's daughter Rachel in marriage and then tricked him into marrying Leah after seven years of work and so got another seven years out of him. Jacob Israel had seen his family grow and flourish because of God's promises. And he and Esau had promised peace to each other after years of fear, a promise that had so far been kept. For Jacob to remember the Shepherd as the Promise Keeper would have been significant in his life of trickery and deceit.

When Jacob says that "God... has been my shepherd all my life to this day," that phrase has a very personal meaning to him. All those years of work for Laban, and probably his work as a boy and teen for his father, Isaac, had been primarily in tending flocks of sheep and goats. Jacob, like his descendant David, the author of the 23rd Psalm, knows just what this work is. Being a shepherd is being a constant presence for the sheep, protecting them from predators, even putting one's own life at risk, making sure they have enough food so that they will grow fat and multiply, making sure they have enough clean water. You cannot be a shepherd *in absentia*; you are right there, down and dirty among the sheep. For Jacob Israel, the one who wrestled

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with God, God is a personal presence, the one who saved him from the wrath of his brother and of his uncle.

And we should remember that Jacob was a skilled shepherd. One promise that he got his uncle and employer Laban to fulfill was that Jacob, when he left Laban's employ, should take as his wages all the dark-colored, spotted, or speckled sheep and goats. He then used his knowledge of animal husbandry to ensure that there were more of this type of animals born to the healthiest mothers. For Jacob, if he could thus manipulate the number of a certain kind of animal born to his flocks, surely God could do so and more for his family. He prays that Joseph and his offspring will experience God's blessing of fruitfulness, "blessings of the breasts and of the womb," so that "in them ... my name (may) be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth." For Jacob Israel, father of a nation, God as Shepherd had a deep and rich meaning.

I've already mentioned one of the most famous children of Israel, their second king, David and his psalm, which we used as our Call to Worship. Some of these same ideas would have been uppermost in David's mind as he composed his much-loved hymn as David, too, had spent his childhood as a shepherd. Even as a boy, David was brave enough to fight off a bear and a lion who tried to carry off lambs from his flock. He, too, knew the day and night labor of being a shepherd. My friends in my lectionary study group reminded me this week of some of the images in David's poem that we've lost sight of in our evolution from agrarian to technological society. For example, you can't actually "make" a sheep lie down but they will do so willingly once they are full of food and water. And sheep are frightened by running water; they will only drink from "still waters," so to ensure the water is fresh, a shepherd often had to physically carve out a channel from a running stream to fill a small pool. A shepherd's rod was used in part to tap the sheep on the back while counting them as they returned to the pen at night, a comforting feeling of being home after a long day. And, in those times when all the hard work a family had to do in subsistence farming or herding was more rigidly divided between genders, the work of setting a table, among enemies or not, was that of the woman of the house. David's vision of God is not only of a shepherd but of a mother.

There is also a tradition of using the Shepherd metaphor for God among Israel's great writing prophets. There are lovely passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah but I want to turn next to the often difficult writings of Ezekiel, the prophet who saw dry bones join together and "a wheel in a wheel, way in the middle of the air." There's nothing fantastic or hard to understand about the vision in chapter 34 of his book, though. In the first part of this prophecy, Ezekiel has a word from the Lord for the failed shepherds of Israel, their nobles, judges, and priests: "Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ... Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them."

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In contrast, Ezekiel writes, God will be Israel's true shepherd, their Good Shepherd: "I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. . . .and I will feed them on the mountains, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..."

For Ezekiel, God and the love of God for the people of God stand in vivid contrast to the powers that held sway in his society. Ezekiel was all too familiar with a world where the powerful took advantage of the weak, where rulers and employers squeezed as much wealth and work as they could out of those to whom they should have been benefactors and partners. Ezekiel knew the kind of shepherd that God was, just as David and Jacob did. But God put it on his heart to call out those who should have been shepherds after God's own heart but instead were busy playing Pharaoh to their generation's Children of Israel.

And, Ezekiel was well aware that this was not, as some might understand it, a class struggle. The sheep were as guilty of cruelty as the shepherds. Hear the word of God through Ezekiel to the sheep: "As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep."

Jesus, the one whose birth was celebrated by shepherds, also understood the image of God as shepherd and of God's people as God's flock. Both Matthew and Luke contain the parable of the 99 and 1: the story of the shepherd who, finding one sheep out of one hundred missing, goes and searches for the lost sheep, rejoicing when it is found. "...he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." And Jesus himself takes on the attributes of the Shepherd, laying down his life for his sheep so that we, God's little flock, might live an abundant life, fed by the Bread of Life, watered by the stream which flows even now from his life, so full and comfortable that we can lie down in green fields of peace and love. By claiming the role of Good Shepherd, Jesus audaciously cast himself in the role of his ancestor David as prophesied by Ezekiel: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken."

But what does all this shepherd talk mean for us? To begin with, we must be ready for the times in our own lives when we are called on to be shepherds to others. Every one of us who has been or is a parent knows what it is to shepherd other human beings. Our children, our grandchildren,

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our nieces and nephews, the children we teach in Sunday School or Scouts or schools all look to us as shepherds at various points in their lives. We feed them, we care for them, we teach them the things they need to know in life. The same is true at the other end of life when our elderly relatives go from shepherding us to being dependent on us. And at different times, we are called on to serve as shepherds to our peers, to our friends, to our brothers and sisters. We are, as our bulletin regularly reminds us, ministers to one another.

And there are still shepherds over us: government officials, employers, bosses, pastors. And we must be ready to remind them, wearing the mantle of Ezekiel, when they are not taking the kind of care of the flocks put in their care as they should. As we discussed these ideas in my lectionary group this week, we (three pastors and a chaplain) all agreed that we pray for our congregations to hold us accountable lest we slip and fall into patterns of behavior that dishonor God and God's people by taking advantage of our positions of authority. And we agreed that part of our calling is to lead the people in raising a ruckus when positional authority is abused elsewhere.

Finally, these passages that show our relationship to God as that of sheep to shepherd remind us to be good sheep to our Good Shepherd. We are not to harm each other but to live together in peace. We are to trust that God does care for us as God's little flock for when we live in that kind of peace, in that assurance of love, it is so much easier for us to love others and to be instruments of God's peace in this world. We are to listen for our Shepherd's voice, ready to follow God wherever God might lead us. Even if God leads us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, God will be with us, protecting us from ultimate harm, feeding our souls, ready to comfort us and love us. As Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Thanks be to God.