

Good Shepherd, Good Sheep

At first glance, it may not be clear exactly what these three passages have to do with each other. The first, Psalm 23, is one of the best-known, most loved passages in all of Scripture. People who have rarely been into a church building and who know no other verses of the Bible recognize and can often quote this psalm verbatim. It is often used at funeral services and in chaplain's visits in hospitals as it is widely considered to be a passage of great comfort for the bereaved or for the frightened. The second passage, from the Gospel according to John, has a more ominous sound to it, as Jesus warns about thieves and bandits who would steal sheep and uses one of his more peculiar metaphors as he describes himself as "the gate for the sheep." It's not until the verse after the break in the lectionary that the more familiar metaphor comes, when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." Finally, there's this peculiar little pericope from Acts chapter 2, a story of the immediate aftermath of the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles as tongues of fire and they were heard to speak in many different languages. No mention of sheep here, comforting or frightening. But I believe there is a connection here beyond the random assignment that one does seem to find sometimes in the Revised Common Lectionary. In these three passages, we find words of comfort and words of challenge; challenge, perhaps, where we do not expect to find it, in the midst of comfort, and comfort, likewise in the midst of challenge. These passages combine to reassure us that there is indeed safety and life to be found in following the Good Shepherd but also that the path on which the Shepherd leads us may not always be what we would consider easy.

Let's begin with that most familiar passage, the 23rd Psalm. We've already sung it together in words adapted from the King James Version, read it responsively in an adaptation by a modern poet, and I've read it to you from the King James. Even that very familiar language, though, can produce some stumbling-blocks for some of us. There are phrases which simply don't connect with our lives in modern day, suburban America. There are words that have come to acquire an offensive air for the 21st Century. And then there are words that are just plain unfamiliar to some. There's a story of a mom who was concerned about her kindergarten son walking to school. He didn't want his mother to walk with him. She wanted to give him the feeling that he had some independence but she wanted to know that he was safe. So she had an idea of how to handle it. She asked a neighbor if she would please follow him to school in the mornings, staying at a distance, so he probably wouldn't notice her. The neighbor said that since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise as well, so she agreed. The next school day, the neighbor and her little girl set out following behind Timmy as he walked to school with another neighbor girl he knew. She did this for the whole week. As the two kindergarteners walked and chatted, kicking stones and twigs, Timmy's little friend noticed the same lady was following them every day. Finally she said to Timmy, 'Have you seen that lady and little girl following us to school all week? Do you know them?' Timmy nonchalantly replied, 'Yeah, I know who they are.' The little girl said, 'Well, who are they?' That's just Marcy Goodnest,' Timmy replied, 'and her mom Shirley. "Who the heck are they and why are they following us?' 'Well,' Timmy explained, 'every night my Mom makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers, 'cuz she worries about me so much. And in the Psalm, it says, 'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life', so I guess I'll just have to get used to it!'

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Before we dig into the meat of the issues and the lessons of the Psalm, I'd like for us to try speaking and listening to some other versions of this great Hebrew poetry to help us connect with some of its more obscure verses. The insert in your bulletin with our gathering song on it has several versions printed on the other side.

The oldest of these versions is still quite new. It's from the New Jerusalem Bible, which was published in 1985. Let's read together:

¹Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

²In grassy meadows he lets me lie.

By tranquil streams he leads me ³to restore my spirit.

He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name.

⁴Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death
I should fear no danger, for you are at my side.

Your staff and your crook are there to soothe me.

⁵You prepare a table for me under the eyes of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup brims over.

⁶Kindness and faithful love pursue me every day of my life.

I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come.

I think that's a lovely version. In fact, I recommend the New Jerusalem Bible for its poetic and literary qualities. It makes a very good Bible from which to read aloud. In this Psalm, it solves a couple of the problematic phrases of the King James that are still present in the New Revised Standard Version which we use as our pew Bible. The rather authoritarian title, the Lord, is replaced by God's Hebrew name, Yahweh. Some of you probably know that the proper name of God was always a part of this Psalm, at least implicitly, but that the Jews for millennia have refused, out of respect, to pronounce God's true name – in fact, the pronunciation we use, Yahweh, is mere conjecture since the name stopped being pronounced before vowel points were added to written Hebrew. Instead, whenever a Jewish reader saw God's name printed in the Scriptures, he would say, "Adonai," "the Lord." This careful usage of God's name has even extended itself to confining the use of Adonai for prayer. Many Jews in mentioning God in conversation will not even say Adonai or Lord but instead, "ha'shem," "the Name." But in our democratic, individualistic society, Lord or Master aren't words we care to use, nor do we like to think that God somehow forces us to lie down somewhere. So, "makes me lie down" becomes "lets me lie down," which was the true meaning anyway, and those of us who have been invited to call our Creator "Father" and to know ourselves as the heirs and friends of God have chosen to be bold with God's name, at least in worship and in theological conversation and writing.

Let's try the next one. It's from the 1995 Contemporary English Version:

You, Lord are my shepherd.

I will never be in need.

You let me rest in fields of green grass.

You lead me to streams of peaceful water.

You refresh my life.

You are true to your name and lead me along the right paths.

I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid.

You are with me.

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Your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe.
You treat me to a feast while my enemies watch.
You honor me as your guest and fill my cup until it overflows.
Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life
And I will live forever in your house, Lord.

I like this one because it solves another one of those phrases that sounds awkward to us from the King James: “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” If you ever had a switch taken to your behind as a child as I often did, a rod is a dubious symbol of comfort. But this translation helps us to remember that a shepherd’s rod was not carried to whack an out of line sheep. Instead, it was the weapon that the shepherd used to repel predators. Some of you may remember that in the story of David and Goliath, David has to persuade King Saul to let him go up against the Philistine giant. He does so by telling Saul of his experience rescuing sheep from a lion and a bear, armed only with a staff. A good shepherd is always ready to defend his sheep against certain death.

Eugene Peterson’s “The Message” was completed in 2002. Let’s read his version together:
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 by my side.
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.

I particularly like Peterson’s everyday, matter-of-fact language. “You let me catch my breath” and “You revive my drooping head” may not be grandly poetic in the way of “He restoreth my soul” or “thou anointest my head with oil,” but they are phrases that speak to our ongoing need for God’s presence in day-to-day life. And I appreciate the blunt declaration, “I don’t need a thing.” It’s a reminder to me that even if I can’t always get what I want, God makes sure that I’ll get what I need. And, yes, that was almost a quote from the Rolling Stones.

One last version and this one’s an adaptation by a contemporary poet rather than a translation. This is from 1994’s *Everyday Psalms* by James Taylor (not the singer) and I know that all of you who travel for business will appreciate it:

1. It's so good to be home,
2. to lie down in my own bed,
to play my favorite music,
to shed the tensions of travel
the way water runs off my shoulders in the shower.
3. Thank you, God.

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You got me to the right gates in the airports; 4. You delivered me from dangerous drivers; You kept me from getting lost in the concrete canyons of the city.

You gave me courage to face my critics.

5. You did not desert me.

When I was lonely, you found me a friend; When I was weary, you led me to a welcome.

The airline didn't lose my bags.

6. I am at peace.

I'd like to live in these familiar walls forever...

Come live with me, and let me live with you.

Taylor does a terrific job of bringing the Psalm into the 21st Century, I think, turning the still waters of David, which we may equate with a stagnant pond, into the blessing of a hot shower after a hard day, reminding us of the danger and frustration of urban life and modern travel as we go, not from pasture to pasture but from city to city to earn our living. There's also a lovely resonance in Taylor's idea of a mutual invitation between humankind and God: "Come live with me, and let me live with you." It reminds me of the Gospel of John, to which we'll turn in a moment, when Jesus says to the disciples, "Abide in me as I abide in you."

So, what do we learn from these multiple renditions of our most familiar scripture? We hear again and again that we can rely on God for the necessities of life, that even in times of trouble, God is right there with us. I think it's important to note that the Psalmist doesn't imply that God will keep all trouble away from us. Those who would suggest that being a part of God's flock means you'll never have another problem in the world are selling a fairy tale, not the Gospel. A life spent walking with God can be a challenge. What is true for the Psalmist, for all his translators and for us, is that God will be present for us, to comfort us, to love us. Nothing, as Paul later wrote, can separate us from the love of God. Not the lion, not the bear, not the valley of the shadow of death. And the ultimate goal for the believer is to be in God's presence. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," says our oldest translation this morning. If you ever want to hear that prayer expressed by a modern singer and instrumentalist who, like his illustrious predecessor on the stringed instrument, David, has scarcely lived a life that any of us would identify as being "after God's own heart," then listen to Eric Clapton sing his song "Presence of the Lord" with the group "Blind Faith." His words, "I have finally found a way to live in the presence of the Lord," are a heartfelt thanksgiving to a loving God who stands by him even as he struggles.

The ideas of being freed from fear by the Good Shepherd and of the blessing of living life in the Shepherd's presence come to us again in John 10. The chapter begins a little awkwardly as Jesus is actually reacting to an incident we read some weeks ago, the Pharisees' persecution of the man born blind whom Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. Jesus' remarks about the false shepherds are part of his criticism of those Pharisees and their actions. These false shepherds dealt in a religion of division and fear. Rather than comforting and feeding the sheep in their care, they made some of them into scapegoats, like the man born blind and his parents, endeavoring to turn the others against them, dividing the flock between the sinful and the righteous and giving each a reason to fear the other. The righteous were taught to fear and hate the sinful for they were blocking the blessings of God from the nation, according to the Pharisees. The sinful feared the judgment and the retribution of the righteous.

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But as we know, Jesus inserted himself between the two groups, as he did with the woman taken in adultery and her accusers. To the fallen, he offered compassion; to the judgmental, a reminder that neither were they without sin. In this passage, Jesus calls himself “the gate,” calling to mind the tradition of shepherds who slept wedged into the narrow gap in the sheepcote wall that served as a doorway. Thus were the sheep protected from predators and thieves, even at the risk of the shepherd’s own life. The sheep were given freedom from fear by their good shepherd, just as Christ Jesus gives us freedom from fear.

In my ignorance of sheep, I said once from this pulpit that sheep are stupid. Carol Lavelle very kindly but firmly took me to task. Sheep, she explained, are not stupid but they are quite gentle as a rule. A recent scientific study in Britain backs her up. Research published in the journal Nature describes how sheep were shown pictures of other sheep and rewarded with food if they moved toward a selected image. As it turns out, the sheep quickly learned to recognize the face that produced a reward, and discriminated between that face and other sheep faces that didn’t produce a reward. The research showed that sheep can get it right eight out of 10 times -- and the research showed the sheep remember faces for an extended period of time. Some sheep could remember up to 50 images for two years. The results suggest that sheep have remarkably good memory systems and are extremely good at recognizing faces. Both are signs of higher intelligence, says Dr. Keith Kendrick, one of the authors of the study. Kendrick says the reason sheep may have a reputation for little intelligence is that they seem to be scared of just about everything. ‘Any animal, including humans, once they are scared, they don’t tend to show signs of intelligent behavior,’ Kendrick said in an interview with Reuters News Agency. Just as for us, fear causes sheep to make bad decisions. But a good shepherd relieves their fear, relieves our fear. A leader who is constantly telling his or her people who they should be afraid of and moving them to react to their fear is not a true shepherd.

Life in the Shepherd’s care is not about fear. In the 23rd Psalm, we hear about peace even in the valley of the shadow of death, joy even in the midst of one’s enemies. Jesus called it life, abundant life. After his physical presence with them had ended and the power of the new comforter had come to them, the disciples, now the young Church, let their freedom from fear guide them into a radical new way of living; living, I think we can say, abundantly, perhaps even lavishly. Listen to their understanding of living in the house of the Lord entailed: learning about Jesus and his teaching from those who’d been with him the longest; enjoying each other’s company, including eating together, praying together, worshipping God together. They were so committed to one another that they were willing to sell possessions to make sure that everyone had what they needed — lavish generosity, indeed. That picture of life lived as good sheep under the Good Shepherd is both comforting and challenging. The challenge is in that generosity; I have heard many people say that it is simply not possible to achieve in our society. Nevertheless, there it is in the Scriptures, as the mark of those earliest Christians. It is the continuation of Luke’s emphasis on Jesus’ mission statement of social justice, “to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the (year of Jubilee).” The path of the Good Shepherd for his flock leads with joy into a Jubilee land, where everyone has what they need.

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Part of the comfort of this passage is the joyous result that comes from following the Good Shepherd. The early Church, Luke tells us, had “the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” In fact, this warm response to the generosity of the Christians lasted for many generations. About one hundred years after the events in Acts, the great theologian Justin Martyr wrote: “We who once took most pleasure in accumulating wealth and property now share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of their different customs now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them and pray for our enemies.” About one hundred years after Justin Martyr, Tertullian rather famously reported, “Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy. . . . See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other.” As Tertullian said, even those who wished to find fault with the Christians could not find it in their generosity. The Roman emperor, Julian the Apostate, who was raised a Christian and disavowed the Church in order to reestablish pagan worship in the empire had this to say, another 120 years later: “The godless Galileans feed not only their poor but ours also. Those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.”

What, then, does all this mean to us? Other than the reassurance of God’s love even in difficult times, the clear message of Psalm 23, what can we take from this assemblage of passages? How can we who call ourselves by the name of the Good Shepherd be good sheep? Does our gratitude for the Shepherd’s blessings to us impel us to follow the Shepherd’s leading? If we want to follow the Shepherd’s path, the right path, the path of righteousness in that old King James language, then we should look to the example of the first Church and to Jesus’ own proclamation of mission. We should learn together, rejoice together, pray together, worship together. And we should find ways to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives and to do our part to bring about the year of Jubilee, when everyone has enough.

Take another look at that insert in your bulletin, the one that shows our statements of our Ultimate Goal and our Vision. It doesn’t use the same words Luke did but I find many evidences that it was motivated by the same Spirit. Over the next several weeks, we will be meeting in large groups and small to discuss ways of fleshing out these statements, of bringing them from paper to reality. If we approach our task humbly and prayerfully, I believe that we will find our own unique way of following in the way of the Good Shepherd, our savior Christ Jesus. I am so looking forward to working with all of you in this endeavor. I believe that God will guide us and empower us to impact our community in marvelous ways, making a difference for our neighbors and leaving a legacy of love and hope for those like young Tyler who are the future of our church. My brothers and sisters, we are the sheep of the Good Shepherd, who loves us, who keeps us safe, even at the greatest cost to himself. May our Good Shepherd guide us as we seek to bring the Good News to all we encounter, leading us to expand the Beloved Community as we go with him, with him, all the way.