

“I Know My Own and My Own Know Me”

Acts 4:5-12 • Psalm 23 • 1 John 3:16-24 • John 10:11-18

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April 21, 2024

Fourth Sunday of Easter

In case you haven't figured it out by now, we've got a theme going on today, weaving its way through the hymns, prayers, anthem, and scripture readings. Christian churches around the globe, in many denominations, observe “Good Shepherd Sunday” on the Fourth Sunday of Easter every year.

The twenty-third Psalm is one of the most well-known and beloved passages in the whole Bible. It is beloved by Jews as well as by Christians. Jesus himself surely knew this Psalm. The Lord was *his* Shepherd no less than the Lord is *our* Shepherd. To refer to God as “shepherd” and us as “sheep” is to use a metaphor that would have been well-understood, as sheep were very plentiful in the land of Jesus' birth. Kent French, a biblical scholar at Harvard, describes shepherds and sheep like this: “In the agrarian culture of ancient Israel, before fences containing grazing livestock, shepherds were essential guardians of economic capital. The Israelite marketplace and sacrificial rites required sheep for wool, milk, and for those who could afford it, meat. In the daily life of the shepherd, however, these fluffy creatures could be at turns affectionate, stubborn, stupid, aimless, passive, easily startled, and always hungry. Sheep are prone to wander off and become easily vulnerable. Foxes, wolves, and jackals knew this. A shepherd, therefore, needed to be strong but not overpowering. If the shepherd came on too forcefully, the flock would scatter and run away. If the shepherd was too gentle or inattentive, ovine passivity and distraction would bring a host of troubles.” I don't have a great deal of personal experience with sheep myself, other than the occasional encounter at a petting zoo or the county fair, so I decided to consult with one of our resident experts, namely, Gladys Welker. I asked Gladys to name the first three things that came to her mind about sheep. She said, first of all, that sheep are very kind and loving animals; secondly, that they are *very* wooly, and third, that they make a *lot* of noise. When I think about us humans, it seems to me that we *can* be very kind and loving, but often we are not kind or loving at all; we're definitely not very wooly (I would certainly welcome a built-in furry coat in the winter months!); but we certainly do make a *lot* of noise! So it's not a perfect metaphor, but it's a *helpful* metaphor to describe our relationship with God. We, too, can be affectionate, stubborn, stupid, aimless, passive, easily startled, hungry, prone to wander, and easily vulnerable to a variety of different kinds of predators. We *need* a Shepherd to lead us, guide us, nurture us, protect us, and defend us.

The life of a shepherd was hardly idyllic. We tend to romanticize it. In truth, it was a dangerous job. Would *you* be prepared to face down a ravenous wolf, with just a club and a staff? Yet teenage boys were routinely sent out into the pastures to do just that. David, the best-known shepherd in the Bible, described the job like this: “whenever a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth, and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it.” (1 Samuel 17:34-35) Being a shepherd was not for the faint of heart!

So when we declare, “The Lord is my shepherd,” we are making a remarkable statement. We are saying that we, like sheep, need leadership, guidance, nurturing, protection, and defense. We are saying that we, if left to our own devices, would likely go astray. We are saying that God is loving enough to care for all our needs, and strong enough to protect us from harm. Psalm 23 is built around these two affirmations; the first three verses focus on God being *loving enough*, while the next two emphasize that God is *strong enough*. God is *loving enough*: “I shall not want” – literally, *lack nothing*. God “makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” This is what a good shepherd does for their sheep. God “leads me in right paths for his name’s sake” – literally, God “leads me in the *paths of righteousness* for the sake of his name.” Those “paths” are not just the *correct* paths, but the *righteous* paths, the paths of *justice*. The Hebrew word *tsedeq*, which is used here, has to do both with *personal righteousness* and *justice in society and economics*. To belong to this flock means we need to walk rightly in our personal lives *and* in society at large. The phrase “for his name’s sake” reminds us that we represent God. We do that best when we *live righteously and promote justice*.

God is also *strong enough*: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Notice that the wording of the psalm has shifted from words *about* God to words *addressed to* God. In the first three verses, the psalmist is *describing* God; in the rest, the psalmist is *talking to* God. We Christians need to be able to do both; to talk *about* God as well as talk *to* God. The latter is called *prayer*; it’s something we all need to learn to do. In the Psalm, the psalmist is telling God how *confident* they feel in the protection that God provides, even in the most adverse of circumstances: “the darkest valley,” or “the valley of death’s shadow,” even directly in the face of evil: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” The psalmist envisions a *rich feast*, even among those to wish to do him harm, because *God* is his protector and defender. This doesn’t mean that we will never face any real danger or any true evil – we very well might! – but when we do, we can be confident of God’s ultimate defense and protection. Someone might even take our life – the Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down in El Salvador in 1980 *while he was serving communion* – but we have confidence that even in death we are wrapped in God’s loving arms and raised to new life. So the psalm rightly concludes: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” That last phrase, “my whole life long,” is literally “for length of days,” which means not just during our *earthly* life, but for all eternity. God is our good shepherd *always and forever*, until the end of time.

When we turn to the New Testament, in the Gospel of John, we find Jesus elaborating on these “sheep” and “shepherd” metaphors. The most noteworthy feature of his teaching is also the most controversial: Jesus says that *he* is the Good Shepherd. Jews, for centuries, had always understood that *God* was their shepherd. Now, Jesus claims that *he* is. This teaching is so familiar to us that it’s easy to glide right over it without realizing just how consequential this was – indeed, how *blasphemous* it could sound to a faithful Jew. Jesus puts himself above humanity and subservient to God at the same time. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father.” Jesus makes it clear, here and elsewhere, that the relationship we have with him bears some striking similarities to the relationship he has with God. The implication is that we are led, guided, nurtured, protected, and defended by *Jesus* just as *Jesus himself* is led, guided, nurtured, protected, and defended by *God*. Jesus goes so far as to “lay down his life” for the sheep, a phrase that is repeated *five times* in the space of just a few verses. We know that Jesus is talking about his death on the cross that granted us redemption in the eyes of God, but his first hearers must have wondered what he was talking

about. Jesus was standing before them, alive and not yet in any real danger, when he said those words. The wolves were not yet threatening to kill him – but he knew they would be coming, sooner or later.

Jesus also makes another striking comment: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” He is saying that he is the Good Shepherd for *more than one flock*. He was talking to a Jewish audience, so presumably he was referring to Gentiles (non-Jews) who would also follow him. The Jews, by and large, considered themselves “God’s chosen people” and would have rejected the idea that God could love Gentiles the same way. Let us not make the same mistake; let us not presume that we are the *exclusive* members of God’s flock. There might well be people or groups that we think are excluded, whom God very much intends to include. Let us not put up walls shutting out those whom God wishes to bring in.

What’s also striking is what happens immediately *after* Jesus offers this teaching. The very next paragraph begins: “Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, ‘He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?’ Others were saying, ‘These are not the words of one who has a demon.’” Jesus saying that he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep was *such a strange teaching* that many people thought he must be *out of his mind*. We take it as a given, as something blatantly obvious, maybe even bland; they didn’t see it as obvious or bland at all!

When we turn to the first epistle of John, we find further reflection on these same themes. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters.” What Jesus did, we ought to be willing to do as well. That doesn’t mean we all have to become martyrs, but it *does* mean that we need to give to the needs of others – give *sacrificially* to the needs of others. “How,” John asks, “does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” We who live in the United States, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, with one of the highest rates of consumer spending, should continually bear this in mind, as nearly 10% of the world’s population lives in extreme poverty, surviving on less than two dollars a day. I find myself wondering what Jesus would say *now* about this global economic situation. John exhorts his listeners: “Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.” Don’t just *say* that you love God and humanity. Do things that *demonstrate* it, things that *prove* it!

A final note. Does this painting look familiar? It is the painting that served as the basis for the stained glass window on the east wall of our sanctuary. It is the work of a nineteenth-century German painter, Bernhard Plockhorst. He painted it in 1878, a mere 22 years before this sanctuary and that window were built. There is some debate about the original colors; in some versions the sky is blue and the sun is not setting. I have not been able to determine where the original painting is now, but there are many copies of it, in posters and postcards, and also in stained-glass reproductions, like the one we have. Plockhorst was still alive when that window was created; he died about seven years later, in 1907.

So the Lord is our shepherd. For us Christians, that refers to *both* God *and* Jesus. The Lord leads us, guides us, nurtures us, protects us, and defends us. The Lord calls us to walk in paths of righteousness. The Lord lays down his life for us, and we are called to give *sacrificially* to the needs of others. We can take immense *comfort* in the image of the Good Shepherd. Let it *challenge* us as well.

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