

4th Sunday of Easter – Shepherd Sunday – May 8, 2022 (Mother's Day)

May the words of my mouth & the thoughts of each heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord – our maker and redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever led a tour? Or accompanied your children on field trips to museums or their annual trip to Washington DC? I always thought that would be such a great experience - helping to get a group from point A to Point B and back again, while enjoying the experience. I learned firsthand however, that that is not always how things turn out.

When I attended seminary, we students were given the opportunity to attend a Missions Conference, held in Ventnor, New Jersey in the month of January. For those of you who don't know, Ventnor is the town directly south of Atlantic City. We were there for a week, and since we were kinda close to New York City, some of our international students asked if we could visit.

The only transportation we had were our own personal cars, (if we owned one) and the 15 passenger, seminary van, that had been entrusted to us. Since so many wanted to take the trip, and they knew I was born and spent part of my life in New York, they designated me to drive the seminary van into the city and give them a tour.

To this day, I do not remember much of anything that we saw. Although everyone said they had a great time, and thanked me for taking them; all I remember was trying to keep all of them together, safe and trying to reinforce to them to be alert to what was happening around them, because the city was such a foreign place for most of them. I had to stop one student who was from Papua New Guinea, from racing to the aid of a man who was hanging on the outside of a city bus, probably because he had arrived late at his stop, and bus did not wait for him. We were waiting at a corner to cross the street, and the student pointed in great alarm as the bus drove by us, with this man hanging on to the bus's side view mirror. He was going to run into traffic and try to stop the bus, and make the driver let this man on. I tried to explain as best as I could that, that was not a good idea.

I remember trying to find a safe place, that would not cost us an arm & a leg, to park the van (with, "Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio", emblazoned on both sides of it). When I finally did, I remember praying that we would find the van in the same condition as we left it. Then as we took off on foot, I was continuously counting the number of people, who were following me. I asked my American colleagues to keep an eye on our brothers and sisters from other parts of the world, to make sure they were alright.

I remember that the sun set early that January evening and I was concerned that our colleagues from Tanzania, who did not have very warm clothing would get cold. But their beaming smiles told me they were having far too good a time to worry about that.

I remember that when we got hungry and I gave them a list of their food options; they did not want to eat at any place they were familiar with – but choose Chinese food for dinner. I asked them several times if they were sure, but they kept reassuring me they wanted to try something new. I led them down the stairs to a basement restaurant, (which is pretty normal in New York City) but for them was a frightening experience. I kept reassuring them it was okay, and when we finally reached the bottom of the stairs, and opened the door to a well-lit comfortable restaurant, they were all smiles again.

I remember walking back to pick up the van, pooling all of our remaining money (the last few dollars all in change) and giving it to the large man who was the parking attendant. I thanked him profusely for keeping an eye on our van – that was in the same condition! – and apologizing, just as profusely for not having much of a tip for him. And I remember him, looking at me and nodding his head and saying, “It’s okay. I understand. You have a safe night.” And I thanked God for his protection of us and the van. That’s what I remember!

I don’t know much about sheep – that’s Pastor Doug’s strong suit. However, I do know about leading groups of people, through challenging, sometimes frightening and unfamiliar experiences, through thick and thin to finally end the day in a safe, warm place. Perhaps you do too. Then we’ve both had an experience of shepherding others.

The 23rd Psalm is The Shepherd psalm. It’s about God being a good shepherd. The psalm is written by David and probably his most well known and best loved psalm. Even people who have no connection to a church or synagogue, can recognize some of these verses. This is the psalm of psalms: children can memorize it fairly easily, and the old die, with its words on their lips.

This psalm, in contrast to others, asks for nothing from God. Many, many psalms ask for anything from a good nights sleep, safety, deliverance from enemies, recovery from an illness, help against persecutors, for right to triumph over wrong, help in the midst of evil times, an end to suffering, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from trouble, judgement on the deceitful, for protection of the whole nation, guidance & support for rulers, relief from oppressors, for help in time of national humiliation, for mercy, for restoration of God’s favor, for a thankful heart, and God’s eternal care. (To name a few.) This psalm, is a reminder OR a statement, of faith in God. It asks God for nothing.

Since this is a journey psalm, I would like to walk thru this psalm one verse at a time.

Verse 1: The Lord is my Shepherd. The word used for “Lord” here, is Jehovah – the Jewish Nation’s word for God. It identifies the writer as one of God’s people. The word for Shepherd is the same word translated from Latin for “Pastor”. Every time you say, “Pastor Doug” – you are saying “Shepherd Doug”. *God is often referred to as the Shepherd of Israel, but rarely is God the shepherd of an individual person. Verse one continues: “I shall not want”. The Hebrew word means “I shall lack nothing”. I may not have all I want, but I will not be missing anything that the Shepherd knows I need. What a tremendous promise!

Verse 2: “He makes me lie down in green pastures” the phrase “makes me” always bothered me a little. The Hebrew word means – to make things level. Sheep are notoriously unbalanced animals. When they fall over, they can not get back up without help, because they have so much weight on the top of their skinny little legs. They are top heavy. So this verse says that the Shepherd makes places level, so the sheep can lie down (that word is used to describe an animal with all its legs tucked up underneath it, to rest comfortably) and still be able to get up after its rested in green pastures – which are not always easy to find in the countryside of Israel. Verse 2 continues – “he leads me beside still waters” – beside peaceful, quiet. Why would that be so important for sheep? If the water in a stream is running - even a little bit, the sheep run the risk of losing their balance and being swept away even in a slow moving stream. Quiet, still waters are safe waters for the sheep.

While some people always thought sheep were dumb (myself included), new research shows that sheep are intelligent in some respects. Yes, they eat too much – right down to the root. They’ll drink contaminated water. And they tend to follow aimlessly and blindly, with no clear destination in mind.

But that is only part of the story. Contrary to everything we’ve been taught about sheep, sheep are smarter than we think-take their brain size for example. If you put a human brain, a chimpanzee brain and a sheep brain on a table, you would be hard pressed to tell the difference between them. And they have remarkable memories – they are able to pick out a particular face in a line of pictures, if that face is associated with a food supply. Some of the sheep in the study could remember up to 50 pictures for as long as 2 years! That’s actually a sign of higher intelligence in animals. Doesn’t sound like sheep are so dumb after all!

Verse 3: “He restores my soul” – the word restore means – to bring back, to keep from leaving. The Hebrew word for soul (unlike the Greek) means breath – the thing that shows we’re alive – our life. So the Shepherd , brings back our life, keeps our life, our breath from leaving us. In our Shepherd we catch our breath; get our life back. Verse 3

continues “He leads me in right paths” – these are not only morally and legally right, but paths that make us right. Paths that are a track that are circular – they always come back to where the Shepherd is. Our shepherd God leads us in right paths of sustenance, nourishment and rest. And why does the Shepherd do this? Because he loves us? Of course! But he does it for His Name’s Sake! For his honor’s sake, his character’s sake. A shepherd has a name or reputation to uphold – it is based on his dependable record of caring for his sheep. God will not betray himself for being known as a Good Shepherd. He wants to call attention to how good a shepherd he is, so that others will want to come and join his fold.

Verse 4 begins, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” – the Hebrew translates that as: “Even though I walk/journey through a narrow, deep gorge with hell and death hovering around me” – that’s what the psalmist is saying. It’s a place none of us wants to be, but we often encounter it on our journey thru this life.

We have learned that sheep aren’t as dumb as we thought. Unless – unless they are scared! Their earlier reputation for being stupid probably comes from the fact that sheep are afraid of just about everything! And sometimes so are we. “Any animal, including humans, once they are scared, don’t tend to show signs of intelligent behavior.” They make stupid decisions, and fear causes a flock to disintegrate, and when sheep (and us) are driven apart, they are most vulnerable to predators. We’ve all had times in which panic sets in. It’s that shaky feeling of having no idea where we are, or which way is up.

We just want everything to make sense again! But the psalmist says:

Even though I am walking through all this – “I will fear no evil”. The Hebrew word for evil is an incredibly powerful word - it means, “to spoil, to break in pieces, to destroy, to make good for nothing”. You see death is no longer our greatest enemy because of Jesus death and resurrection. BUT Satan/our adversary, throws evil into our lives to spoil us, to break us in pieces – to make us good for nothing, so that we can’t be used by God any longer. That is evil. And that is the greatest threat to all of us! To be useless to God. But the psalmist “Fears No Evil” - fears nothing destroying him, or breaking him in pieces, or making him good for nothing! Why? Because “You Shepherd are with me!”

Everything in the psalm changes here! This is the center of Psalm 23. The language changes from third person “He” – He leads, me he restores my soul - to more personal second person, “You” – You are with me! This is the center of psalm 23. There are 26 Hebrew words before this and 26 Hebrew words after this. The psalmist changes from talking about his shepherd to talking to his shepherd! Everything changes here – and it changes for us also when we do the same thing. When we stop talking about God and start talking to God!! As a sign in a church parking lot said, “If you can’t sleep, don’t

count sheep. Talk to the Shepherd!"

Verse 4 continues- "For You are with me. Your rod and your staff – they comfort me". The depth of the darkness in the valleys can shake our confidence. But the Shepherd reminds us that He is here, and will never leave us alone in the valleys of life. His rod comforts us. Another word for "rod", would be "club". It's a short but solid stick for fighting off intruders that would harm the sheep. It was used to beat back wolves and other animals that would harm the flock. No wonder it brings comfort! But there is also the staff. It either had a crook at the end, or like this one more of a circle that would go around the neck of a sheep to pull it back from danger, and pull it back in to the fold. So, the rod beats up on enemies and the staff keeps the sheep from wandering away into danger.

Whatever your darkest valley is, be it a terminal illness, loss of a job, a betrayal by a friend, a marital problem, a failure of a business venture or a failure in a college course: your shepherd God is with you offering the comfort of his Rod, that will beat back anything that will harm you & his Staff that will keep you out of danger and close to Him.

Verse 5 says – "You prepare a table before me". The Hebrew word for "prepare" is the word translated "to put in order, or to arrange". It is used when a sacred meal is being given. It was used when a man brought a Thankoffering to the temple to present it to God. He puts everything in order and arranges everything in God's presence so his offering will be accepted by God. But here the roles are reversed – God is the one who puts everything in order and arranges things 'just so'. It is an example of God's lavish generosity! And the word translated "table" is not a piece of furniture. It means to prepare, to spread out a feast. "You put everything in order for a feast for me".

Verse 5 continues: "In the presence of my enemies". So David's shepherd not only is going to great lengths to prepare a feast for him, he is also doing it in the presence of his enemies. And these enemies, don't have to be a person or a group of people. Enemies are anything that wants to afflict, to shut us up, to bind us up, to bring distress and narrow our life. So this shepherd is going to provide safety and care and a feast in the presence of everything that would diminish the life of his sheep. And the shepherd will "anoint my head with oil". Anointing was very important in both the old and new testaments. It is used in 4 ways: 1. Anointing set a person or people apart for God's use only. King David was anointed Israel's King and Shepherd of God's people. 2. Anointing empowered people to accomplish the tasks God gave them to do. So, first you were set apart, and then given the ability to do what God wanted you to do! 3. Was a promise of protection – no one was allowed to harm God's anointed. In biblical times when anyone offered hospitality to someone, it was implied that once they had been served a meal,

they were now under the protection of the host. So the Shepherd, after spreading a feast before his guest will now protect him.

Verse 5 closes with “My cup overflows”. As we’ve learned before, “the cup” was a Jewish phrase that came from the practice of a king handing a cup to all his guests at a banquet. It was the king’s invitation to enjoy the experience of feasting in his presence. “The cup” became a symbol for the life and experience that God handed out to each person. It’s David’s way of saying that his life & experience of joy that God had given him, were more than he could hold! It was wonderfully overwhelming!

Verse 6 begins – “Surely, Goodness & Mercy shall follow me” – the word here for goodness is actually “chesed” -which is translated many other places in the bible as “steadfast love”. So the verse reads: “Surely/certainly steadfast love and mercy/favor shall follow me, all the days of my life”. Bad times and good ones, come and go, but the Shepherd’s steadfast love and favor will always accompany us all the days of our lives. You’ll notice that the love and favor of the Shepherd Follow David all the days of his life. The word here for “follow” is actually the same word used in Exodus, to describe Pharaoh’s army following Israel to the Red Sea. It means to: run after, pursue, hunt down. The Shepherd’s steadfast love and mercy will overtake us and bless us, everyday of our life. Once we were followed by enemies, but now we are followed by God’s steadfast love and favor. The word for “Days” here means from one sunrise to the next. For as many sunrises as God gives you.

And the psalm concludes: “and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long”. The word for dwell means to remain, to endure in, to settle in. It is a new permanent house. The word is used for the new house the bride and groom move into when they are married. It is the beginning of life in a new place, with a new relationship, a new house for a new family. So the Shepherd will invite us to settle into His family home for the entire number of days we have.

Finally, Scientists have also discovered that sheep have keen hearing. This makes it possible for them to discern the voice of their shepherd from among many others. They will always move toward the person they perceive to be a friend, particularly if that friend cares for the sheep. The way their brain is organized suggests that they have an emotional response to what they see in the world. Jesus, our great Shepherd says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” We are called to hear, and then listen to the voice of our Shepherd, and follow him.

In a world that is increasingly more scattered and scared, our task as the Shepherd’s church is to listen to the voice of our Shepherd and then, constantly and compassionately

Speak the words of the Good Shepherd to all those who are lost, hurting and alone. To welcome everyone into the fold. Like Jesus, each of us has been entrusted with a small flock – be it family, coworkers, friends at school or at church. We need to be willing to care for these sheep like Jesus does: to know what they need and to lead them well.

Through all of the difficult and disturbing changes of life, we are cared for by a changeless God. Although we face threats to our physical, emotional and spiritual health, we have a God at the center of our lives who gives us the assurance that “surely steadfast love and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives”. Stumbling through dark and threatening valleys, we are pursued by steadfast love. Worrying about daily needs, God prepares a feast and pours us an overflowing cup. Unsure about our futures, God invites us to dwell in His house for as long as we live. Today’s threats are balanced by God’s help. Today’s needs are balanced by God’s provision. Tomorrow’s uncertainties are balanced by God’s promises.

Psalm 23 gives us a vision of a radically God centered life. To center our life on God, our Good Shepherd, is to go back to the very root of life; to the one who gives us everything we need.

Our good Shepherd, has promised: “I give my sheep eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.”

AMEN!