



The Shepherd's Care

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

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Psalm 23 -NRSV

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 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.

Psalm 23 -King James Version

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 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. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

In the ancient catacombs of 3rd century Rome, in the narrow, twisting underground tunnels which are several stories below ground and can go on for miles, the walls are filled floor to ceiling with graves that were secretly carved out of layers of volcanic rock. It is a forbidden place of darkness, secrecy, stale air, confined spaces, profound piety, and illegal early Christian art, including the first known picture of Jesus, a painting of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Painted on

the walls of the St. Callisto catacomb in Rome is an image of Jesus carrying a sheep across his shoulders. Can you imagine walking quietly, secretly, through the catacombs guided only by a small oil lamp to find Christian family and friends who are gathering for a memorial meal by a designated grave? Can you imagine the sound of the Roman soldiers' armor clanking along the street above you as they searched for the followers of Jesus? Can you imagine risking your life to gather to worship God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in secret? Given all of this it is easy to imagine why someone painted on the ceiling a picture of Jesus as a strong young shepherd who would take care of them.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

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. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

What security, what affirmation, what love, hope, encouragement, mercy and grace.

In biblical times sheep were essential not only for wool and for food but also for temple worship. The image of God as the shepherd and people as sheep was deeply engrained into the culture of Israel so it is no wonder that Jesus drew upon this image as well.

In the Book of Genesis when Jacob was blessing his son, Joseph, he spoke of God as a 'shepherd,' as he said, "The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, *the God who has been my shepherd* all my life to this day."

Isaiah, like many of the prophets, spoke of God as a shepherd who feeds, guides and protects his flock. "*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*"

David spoke of the Good Shepherd beyond his most famous and beloved psalm, "For *he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.* O that today you would listen to his voice!"

The good shepherd cares for those who have no sense of direction, who are defenseless, who cannot get up without help, who are not meant to carry burdens, who will settle for less than they deserve, who cannot care for themselves when wounded, who are emotional, who recognize the shepherd's voice, and who are both valuable and innocent. Is it any wonder that God, that Jesus, is the good shepherd, and we are the sheep?

The most common image of Jesus the Good Shepherd is of a clean, pure white robed and gentle young man tenderly holding a spotless lamb, as this image offers a sense of care, tenderness, and grace. While this is certainly true and comforting, Jesus the Good Shepherd is so much more. He, like all the good shepherds responsible for the care of their flock, is fiercely protective, and gets down into the mud and muck and briar patches that endanger the sheep. He can bear any challenges that threaten his flock, and will lay down his life for those in his care.

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep are totally dependent upon him. The Good Shepherd's rod and staff bring comfort, the rod fights off wild animals, the staff directs the way to go. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, he cares for them, he protects them in all situations, even when his own life is at risk. And he does by using his own voice. Ancient Middle East shepherds did not use sheep dogs to drive the sheep, but rather led them by using their own voice. They taught the sheep to follow them, to trust them, by recognizing the unique sound of their voice.

We hear the voice of the Shepherd, we hear the voice of Jesus, and we trust and we follow the One who guides and protects, the One who provides and watches over us. He leads us. We hear his voice in our Scriptures, in our prayers, in our worship, in our hymns, and in our actions that echo his voice in our lives.

Our early Christian ancestors faced martyrdom and persecution, they faced lions and fire. The first painting of Jesus the Good Shepherd, the knowledge of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, offered them hope, assurance and encouragement in the dangers of their time. The Good Shepherd was more than with them, he knew them, he carried them on his shoulders, and he fed and nurtured them.

The dangers of our time and world are different than 18 centuries ago, yet we are just as much in need of hope, assurance and encouragement. We need to be carried on the Shepherd's shoulders, be nurtured, and fed. We need to be protected from the hired hands who do not have our best interests at heart. We listen for the unique sound of the Shepherd's voice, the voice of the One who knows us, and we follow his lead away from the mud and muck and briar patches, we follow his lead away from cliffs, from threats, from other voices that would lead us astray.

Jesus has been the Good Shepherd throughout his life, his ministry, and now will be in a new way. Soon he will be ascending, returning to the God he calls Father, so that in abiding with God, with the Divine Parent, he possesses a powerful love. This power cannot keep us in perfect safety in our dangerous world, but it can love us into strength, confidence, and reassurance. The thorns of hate and injustice, of hunger and homelessness, the briar patches of despair, division and isolation, the cliffs of racial strife and cultural rejection, the mud and muck of grief, illnesses and addictions, are all under the watchful eye and care of an unblinking Shepherd. There is so much that wreaks havoc in our world, in our lives, in our relationships, in our bodies, and the Good Shepherd is there with us through all the evil and dark valleys, carrying us on his shoulders, leading us to greener pastures, still waters and right paths.

Where today, where this very moment, do we hear the voice of the Shepherd leading? In a year when the Coronavirus has revealed disparities in access to medical care, when three guilty verdicts are the first baby steps in meaningful racial justice, when we have seen the earth begin to heal as we have been restricted, will we trust and follow the Good Shepherd to greener pastures, still waters and right paths? In our own lives, in our own faith journeys, where is the Good Shepherd restoring your soul, anointing your head with oil and preparing a table for you in the presence of all that would seek to harm you?

The Lord is our shepherd; we shall not want. Amen.