

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Eric Howell
Green Pastures and Still Waters
John 10
April 21, 2024

Both our Psalm and gospel readings this morning describe the Lord as shepherd. You may not know or particularly care a thing in the world about sheep or other farm animals. But you know what it's like to feel lost and don't know how to get back to where you want to be in your relationship with God or yourself or the people in your life. You know what it's like to feel afraid as if each step you take leads you into danger, but you have to walk the path. You know what sorrow is, the sorrow of death and loss. And maybe you also know what being at peace feels like, what it's like to experience full joy, and what it's like to feel totally loved, protected, and known.

And so you may not know or care much about sheep. But something deep inside you responds to this saying: *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

With those words, almost everyone knows you are reciting the 23rd psalm or at least they know you're calling up the shepherd psalm, possibly the only one they've heard before. It's known by people who are very familiar with the Bible and with those who aren't at all. It's a strange thing, how the shepherd/sheep image is both a subject most of us really know nothing about and at the same time, relate to intimately.

People love this psalm, and especially the opening line: the Lord is my shepherd. The image of the shepherd is one of the closest bonds between the human and the animal. It evokes something almost primal in our faith. Probably because it's not a dense theological assertion of God's character: the Lord is a shepherd. That would say something if it said that. Shepherd was a familiar site in ancient Israel just as sheep were a familiar animal. So much so that the image of a shepherd was used to describe the kings of Israel and the priests of Israel. They were the shepherds. Some were good shepherds, protecting and providing for the people. Some were bad shepherds, not protecting them but using them. Either way, the leaders shepherded the sheep. This runs all through the Old Testament. To say God is a shepherd is to extend the idea divinely to God who is the ultimate shepherd, and from whom all the shepherding acts derive. That would be a powerful assertion, but the psalm goes a different direction. Not the Lord is a shepherd, but the Lord is my shepherd. It's personal. It's intimate. And I think that's why it is so beloved.

If you are one who loves this psalm, you're not alone. But I don't think anyone has ever loved it like the 19th century preacher Henry Ward Beecher who gave tribute to the psalm in the years after the Civil War. He began, "The 23rd psalm is the nightingale of the psalms. It is small of a homely feather, singing shyly out of obscurity; but, O, it has filled the air of the whole world with melodious joy, greater than the heart can conceive. Blessed be the day on which that psalm was born."

Indeed, Henry Ward Beecher. The psalm models how our prayer and spirituality can hold together the life experiences that encourage and vex us. The Lord provides for us, yet still, we walk through dark valleys. Yet even there we are not alone. Enemies are around, yet we picture a table for joyful feasting set even when surrounded on every side. The prayer begins in a pasture and ends in a house, the house of the Lord, where I will dwell the rest of my days, and by God's grace, forever. The psalm is comfort in time of trial, rest in time of weariness, hope in time of discouragement.

Faith can be a relatively inert part of your life until you come to crisis. In crisis, you find out what you are made of; or even better, you find out who you are in God. You find that you are in the compassionate heart of God who is with you and will never abandon you. This is the prayer of trust that arises from such a place in life. Only one who has experienced crisis can say with a personal knowingness—the Lord is with me and in the Lord, I have all I need.

The preacher Henry Ward Beecher had a lot more to say about the psalm. Let's hear it:

[The Psalm,] The singing angel goes on his way through all the lands, singing in the language of every nation, driving away trouble by the pulses of the air which his tongue moves with divine power... It has charmed more griefs to rest than all the philosophy of the world. It has remanded to their dungeon more felon thoughts, more doubts, more thieving sorrows, than there are sands on the seashore. It has comforted the noble host of the poor. It has sung courage to the army of the disappointed. It has poured balm and consolation into the heart of the sick, of captives in dungeons, of widows in their pinching griefs, of orphans in their loneliness. Dying soldiers have died easier as it was read to them; ghastly hospitals have been illumined; it has visited the prisoner and broken his chains, and, like, Peter's angel, led him forth in imagination, and sung him back to his home again. It has made the dying Christian slave freer than his master, and consoled those whom, dying, he left behind mourning, not so much that he was gone as because they were left behind and could not go, too. Nor is its work done. It will go singing to your children and my children, and to their children, through all the generations of time; nor will it fold its wings till the last pilgrim is safe, and time ended; and then it shall fly back to the bosom of God, whence it issued, and sound on, mingled with all those sounds of celestial joy which made heaven musical forever.¹

That's how you preach. That's how you read Scripture. That's how Scripture speaks to us when our hearts are cracked open wide, and it sings in us. In John 10, Jesus adopts this image and makes it his own. I am the good shepherd. In saying this, he is claiming for himself the kingship, the high priesthood, and the divine character. He is not a hired hand on a temporary contract; he is not a thief come to steal or destroy; he is not just a shepherding type. I am the good shepherd. And you are my sheep.

¹ quoted at length in William Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 363

Key is his word: I lay down my life in order to take it up again. I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority, the power to lay it down, just as I have the power to take it up again. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. In the lyrics our own Kurt Kaiser left us: “He gave his life, what more could he give? O how he loves you, O how he loves me; O how he loves you and me.”

All the action is Jesus’s, and it is personal. We are just the sheep of his fold, with one another, belonging to a community that is his and only his. Other sheep will come into the fold, called by this same shepherd. And we are to welcome them, receive them, make space for them, pray for them, delight in them, share the good news with them of the good shepherd, but all the action, all the grace, all the power is his both in the giving and receiving.

This is love. It is the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the sheep. And it is the shape of our lives in Christ. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we, then lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Love for one another is God’s love made knowable and tangible. We believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another. In this, we abide in him and he in us.

Christians have always turned this shepherding image. In the early centuries of Christianity, in the underground catacombs of Rome where the dead were laid to rest and where the living came to remember and worship, there was one of the first depictions of Christ painted in fresco on the wall, a painting of a shepherd with a sheep on his shoulders. Wolves stand on the flanks, but the sheep is not in danger any more. Because the shepherd is there. Taken up on the shoulders of the good shepherd, she is taken to safety; she is taken home. It’s a promise for those who have died. It’s assurance for those who are living. Whatever heavy burden we carry on our shoulders, we are carried on his. That is a prayer—a prayer of confession and trust. It can be spoken to God over and over again, whatever heavy burden I bear on my shoulders, I am born on yours, O Lord, my shepherd.

It is with this image in our eyes and on our hearts that the dead are buried. And it is with this image that the living have the courage to go and face their trials. May that image be burned in our hearts now: in whatever challenges you face, in whatever dark valley you must walk. You do not go alone. You are carried. You are in the Lord’s tender embrace. You are amongst friends. You are beloved. And you shall lie down in green pastures, you shall come to still waters. Your soul shall be restored. And you shall always have a dwelling place in the house of the Lord and in the heart of Christ, who laid down his life for you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.