

It's a matter of emphasis...

In this technologically-savvy decade, where announcements of worldwide terrorists' demise and presidential candidates' intentions are put forth on Twitter, Facebook and other social media before the "old fashioned" channels of television, radio or even newspapers(!), there is a sea-change happening. When you type something in a text message, there are words that convey a message; but the emphasis that you may intend cannot be easily discerned by the reader. Everything is written in a flat "affect" if you will, and it is often impossible to determine where the writer's intention might lie. If you hear someone speak the same words, the emphasis on the proper words conveys, perhaps, a different meaning, than if the text was delivered in a monotone. The last century with its growth of radio and television helped us communicate with the emphasis we can hear in the spoken word. By having things delivered to us by "text" only, we are losing our ability to discern emphasis—and it's the matter of "emphasis" that helps us determine meaning.

When you think about it, reading the written words of the Bible is similar. We don't have a magical highlighter from God that shows us where the emphasis should lie. Our biblical writers for the most part, did not underline, highlight or italicize text. They wrote their words in a way that it is up to the reader to apply their faith-filled understanding, and hope they allow their faithful hearts and souls to put the emphasis on the right words.

I share this observation with you with regard to this morning's text, because we have probably the most well-known and beloved of all of David's psalms—the 23<sup>rd</sup>—as our scriptural hymn of praise. The psalm that is most known to be read at funerals, in particular, because it is known and felt as a psalm of comfort. A psalm that we learn from a very young age that Jesus is our Shepherd and we are his sheep. Like little lambs, we are taken care of by the One who provides all we need—even in the presence of our enemies. We are protected. We are cared for. We are given life and given life abundantly in green pastures, are allowed to rest along quiet streams and we are guarded on all sides—like the shepherd that guards all sides of His flock.

John is the scribe who proclaims in his Gospel that Jesus recalled to his faithful disciples that he himself is the fulfillment of the shepherd in David's psalm. John recounts both before and after our portion of chapter 10 that we read today, that the Jews were not pleased with this reference. Much of the crowd thought, as described in the New Jerusalem translation, "He is possessed, he is raving!" while others said, "These are not the words of a man possessed by a devil: could a devil open the eyes of the blind?"

How do we, as Christians who follow the one who laid down his life for all of us, how do we, the "other sheep that He has that are not of the Jewish fold," interpret our Christ as the Good Shepherd? How are our blind eyes opened? How do you see him? It is a matter of emphasis—the Easter emphasis.

Easter is the event in human history that gives us insight into God's highlighter that God uses for emphasis. Jesus story begins at Christmas when our Christ came into this world

to confirm our Father's love for us by sending his son to have a human-divine relationship with us. But it is Easter where His calling takes on the meaning—the emphasis—for our lives. Jesus of Nazareth came into this world to lay down his life in place of ours to show us there IS eternal life. He lived into his calling at Easter, and we are living into ours when he calls us, we respond, and we are held in the shepherd's loving embrace.

Taking the words of the most beloved psalm let's try to let our eyes be opened to new meanings and messages that our Lord might be encouraging us to see with a renewed emphasis. We don't have to go any further than the very first line...the one we all know...to begin to proclaim to the world—as we are charged by Peter in Acts that as witnesses to a risen Lord, as heirs to an eternal kingdom this is our mission: to let the world know that the Lord Jesus Christ IS the embodiment of the good shepherd.

So let us look how the emphasis changes the whole meaning:

The LORD is my shepherd.

The Lord IS my shepherd.

The Lord is MY shepherd.

The Lord is my SHEPHERD.

What does it mean to proclaim someone as Lord? Faithful Thomas, emboldened by his “doubting” status” from our reading just two weeks ago, is the first of the disciples to proclaim Jesus as “MY LORD, and MY GOD!” He by his proclamation, we by our doubt-filled faith proclaim the same when we recognize the risen Christ. Jesus lives. He rose from the grave. He is the one we can and will follow in this life into the next. He is LORD of our life. He is Lord of our love. He is LORD!

Which leads us to the use of the present tense verb: IS. The Lord IS my shepherd. Not was—we don't just follow a messiah who lived 2,000 years ago. The Lord IS risen indeed! He lives! He is alive! NOW!

The Lord is MY shepherd. Yes, he is the risen Christ who is Lord of our community of faith. Yes he IS the one who gives us life in this present day and life forevermore. He offers it freely to all—Jews and non-Jews alike—to those that recognize he is the messiah, the Christ, the gatekeeper who will protect and provide.

But in addition to being there for all of us, he is there for you, for me, individually. He is MY shepherd. I, you, all of us can have an individual relationship with God in his risen Son Jesus the Christ. Coming from Washington, DC, it is always enlightening to me when I go back and in a social setting be reminded that it's “who you know” in the power halls of government that increases your status in the Washington social scene. Out here, I'm sure Hollywood operates much the same way...it's who you know.

Well, we individually and corporately know the risen Lord. We know, personally, how he protects and provides. He is yours...he is mine...is our shepherd that allows us to know and love Him in a very personal relationship. As the medieval scholar Erasmus

proclaimed and more recently Dr. Carl Jung engraved both over his doorway entrance and onto his tombstone: *Bidden or unbidden, God is there*. My emphasis: *Claim God's presence*—as your Lord, living now, shepherding you on your way.

The Lord is my SHEPHERD. What does it mean to call Jesus our shepherd? When we have a shepherd, someone looking out for us, we can set our minds and hearts at rest. I am reminded of an old Spanish proverb: “It is a blessing to do nothing -- and then to rest afterwards.” To lie down in green pastures would be impossible if we didn't feel protected. To let our souls be at rest with the one who gives us everything we need. To absorb the sun like the greenest blades of grass do. To walk along and sit beside a babbling brook—I don't know about you but I when I think of what heaven must be like, green meadows and comforting, refreshing streams fill my thoughts and heart and soul.

For Christ is the shepherd of our souls, the ultimate creator, guide and protector. We are not forsaken. We are not alone. And no matter what the wolves of this world can threaten to do to us, the good shepherd is there for us...now in this life, and in the life to come. The shepherd who watches over the gate not only protects his flock within the borders, but keeps the evil one at bay. He is our ultimate offense and defense. He is not a hired hand who only does “his part” when convenient, but is there for you shepherding you through mountaintop experiences and low valley depths. In my own life, I am astounded by His tangible presence in moments of joy-filled wholeness and sorrow-filled, but blessed brokenness.

Our LORD, who IS MY SHEPHERD, is the reason we exist. By His life, His death and His resurrection, He gives our life meaning. His cross gives the emphasis we need to fully comprehend the magnitude of this psalm that we embrace as children when we proclaim declaratively, “the LORD who IS MY SHEPHERD!” AND when we hear it at funerals when a faithful person states as fact, from life experience: the LORD who IS MY SHEPHERD!

This psalm is especially poignant when studied in the shadow of the cross. For we stand, always in the shadow of the cross. And our interpretation of this psalm must be seen not only through the eyes of the boy shepherd and future king of Israel David, but through the prism of the cross. In the Good News shared with us this Easter season, we have witnessed a risen Lord indeed. Christ was with Mary at the tomb. He was his disciples, especially Thomas, in the upper room. He was on the road and breaking bread in Emmaus. He is with us today. And living into the Easter message changes how we look for emphasis and meaning in this psalm, as we live out His emphasis and meaning for our lives.

*The Lord is our shepherd: guiding, protecting and providing everything we need. He makes us lie down in green pastures. He stops us in our tracks. He leads us beside quiet waters. He helps us be restored by his life-giving water that refreshes our minds, bodies and spirits. He restores our souls. He rose from the grave and showed us there is life forever in Him. He guides us in paths of righteousness for his Name's sake. If we allow our will to cease and try to follow His, we will be guided into everlasting light and life.*

*Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil. We are walking after the resurrection, we don't have to bear the hard wood of the cross. We live forever in its life-giving shadow— and doing so, we have nothing to fear! For you are with us: your rod and your staff, they comfort us. You are by our side—like you were at the tomb with Mary, you broke through doors and barriers to be beside a doubting, faithful Thomas in the upper room. You were on the road and breaking bread with your faithful in Emmaus. You prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies. You shared your last supper with all of us. You call us by name, and when we respond, you anoint us with oil. The cup of life, filled with forgiveness which you offer at every Eucharist, makes our cups of life overflow. Because of your death and resurrection, surely goodness and love follow us all the days of our life, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

In Jesus name we pray -- Amen.

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