

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
John P. Ryan
“The Lord is My Shepherd”
John 10: 1-10
4th Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017

The hymn we’ve just is a musical rendition of probably one of the most famous and best loved Old Testament scriptures. This psalm, the 23rd, is often read and heard in the midst of death and dying, as it can offer comfort to a grieving family as well as hope for all who listen. I am sure many of us memorized this scripture when we were children. Maybe you learned it with your grandmother, reciting line by line with you. But of course, to appreciate its beauty, we learned it in the King James version. If you know it, I invite you to say it with me:

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.

James Mays, in his commentary on Psalms says “Shepherd was a rich and complex notion in Israel’s culture. Of course, the ways of sheep and their shepherd were familiar to all. The primary duties of the shepherd’s vocation were provision and protection for the flock. The shepherd pastured the flock, led them in the right way when they had to move, fended off predators, all pastoral activities described in the psalm. The sheep were the responsibility of the shepherd, and was accountable for their welfare and safety.” The image of the shepherd here is one that is vigilant, tough enough to thwart predators and extremely reliable.

The familiarity of the words of the psalm can sometimes hinder us from truly entering into the meaning and intent of its words. Thus the paraphrase of Eugene Peterson might be a helpful beginning point to hear this Psalm with new ears. Peterson, a Presbyterian pastor, who wrote *The Message* interprets Psalm 23 in the following way:

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.

*You have bedded me down in lush meadows;
you find me quiet pools to drink from.*

*True to your word, you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.*

Even when the way goes through Death Valley (but I don't think he means the Death Valley in Clemson),

*I'm not afraid when you walk by my side.
 Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.
 You serve me a six-course dinner
 right in front of my enemies.
 You revive my drooping head;
 my cup brims with blessing.
 Your beauty and love chase after me
 every day of my life.
 I'm back home in the house of God
 for the rest of my life.*

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." "God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing." Which words are correct, which are true? Both are. The words of Psalm 23 are those of an ancestor in our faith who was delivered, in some way, from danger and who praised God for help in the midst of that danger.

The psalm singer takes on the role of a sheep or goat, animals herded and cared for by shepherds. These are animals that, without the care of a shepherd, would be easy prey for other animals in the open grazing land.

In the psalm, the shepherd provides green pastures for grazing, still waters for drinking, and right paths for travel from one grazing place to another (verses 2-3). In troubled areas, the protection of the shepherd provides safe passage for the flock (verse 4). And even when trouble is nearby, the shepherd makes sure that the flock can feed and water in safety and can lie down for a night's rest (verse 5). Therefore, the flock can count on continued existence because of the faithfulness of the shepherd (verse 6).

James Mays goes on to say "The earliest Christians said The Lord is my shepherd and understood Lord to be also the title of Jesus. In John 10:11, Jesus says directly, I am the good shepherd. They found him to be shepherd and guardian of their souls. In the Christian rereading of the psalm, Jesus, as the shepherd in David's place, is the one who restores our souls, leads us in the paths of righteousness, accompanies us through danger, spreads the Holy Supper before us in the presence of sin and death, and pursues us in his gracious love all the days of our lives.

To be honest, I don't know a lot about sheep. I've heard people say that they are not very smart. But those folks who tell me that I am guessing don't really know anything about sheep either. I think it is the flock mentality that we associate with them makes us believe they are not very smart. We rugged, autonomous, individualistic Christians can't begin to understand why any living creature would follow the crowd the way that sheep seem to do. Because, of course, we know nothing about such behavior.

Because I don't know a lot about sheep, I looked them up on Wikipedia and found that "In regions where sheep have no natural predators, none of the native breeds of sheep exhibit strong flocking behavior." Sounds pretty smart to me. They stick together to protect one another from anyone or anything that may be attempting to harm even one of the flock. I also

read that sheep have the ability to remember faces, not only faces of other sheep, but all faces, for years and years. In other words, they protect each other and they do not forget the shepherd they follow.

This week's lectionary points us toward that well known image of Jesus as The Good Shepherd, an image that seems to make so much sense to us, but that most of us know little about. When is the last time you were called out to the field to get the sheep back in the pasture? Luckily, if we are confused by the image of Jesus as The Good Shepherd, we are in good company. It says right in the gospel of John that the first disciples to hear his analogy didn't get it either.

So, he spelled it out for them as clearly as he could. In the NRSV, starting in the midst of verse 7, it reads, "*I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*"

Rev. Tiffany Hall McClung, an ordained minister of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Chaplain at Memphis Theological Seminary writes, "wait a minute, that doesn't say he is The Good Shepherd! What is all this gate business? How are we supposed to reconcile Psalm 23 and the words of 1 Peter 2:25, which says" *For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls*" with Jesus comparing himself to a gate

And how is talking about Jesus being a gate helpful? Gates are not very exciting. It's not the stuff of great art or stained glass windows.

A gate of grey, weathered wood, dotted with knotholes and being swung open and shut by some gatekeeper is not as interesting as the image of a gentle shepherd. But why a gate?

What's more, in verse 9 Jesus talks about the need to "enter through me." But really no one ever actually passes through a gate anymore that you could walk right through a door in your house. You pass through the doorway which is the empty space that opens up for you once the door itself is opened or moved aside. But none of us should not literally pass through a door or gate. Our inability to pass through the wood of the door is precisely what makes this metaphor useful.

A story from the Middle East may be helpful in understanding what Jesus is getting at:

While doing some academic research, a Bible commentator ran across an Arab shepherd. The shepherd was not a Christian and probably did not know the Bible. But he was a keeper of sheep and so was showing off his flock as well as the penned-in area where his sheep slept every night. He said "And when they go in there, the shepherd said proudly, they are perfectly safe."

But the scholar noticed something: You sheep sleep in that pen yet I just noticed that the pen does not have a gate on it.

"Yes, that's right", the shepherd replied. "I am the gate."

"What do you mean?"

“After my sheep are in the pen, I lay my body across the opening. No sheep will step over me and no wolf can get into the pen without getting pass me first. I am the gate.”

Here is an image to savor. Perhaps this may help explain how Jesus can so freely mix up the imagery of being both the shepherd and the gate. Perhaps it was possible to be both after all. The gate is the one who lays himself down to keep what is good on the inside and to keep what is bad outside. And whether or not the good is kept safe from the bad, the point is that it will be the gate, perhaps the very body of our Lord, that makes the difference.

Here is what I think. I think that Jesus came to this earth to lead us in The Way. That Way is taking care of each other like sheep do. He calls to us to listen for his voice, to follow his lead, but in the meantime, we better be bunched up together in that big field so that we can protect each other when times get hard or predators lurk in the night. McClung goes on to say “And, when it all boils down - Jesus is not only the leader, but THE WAY. My brain can't comprehend it. We may not be smart like a sheep, but thank goodness we remember the face of Jesus and we can huddle in the mass known as the Body of Christ - and that is what protects us and keeps us safe when things get really hard.”

Jesus is The Good Shepherd and Jesus is the gate. Jesus is our leader. Jesus provides food and gives us shelter. Jesus is our way. Thanks be to God, Amen.