

July 18, 2021

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.

I am reading of course from the King James version of that most beloved Psalm, Psalm 23; our psalm for today which we read together a few moments ago. Surely it is the all-time favorite part of Holy Scripture, known by heart and recited by many in times of distress, to bring comfort and encouragement.

I learned Psalm 23 by heart when I was 6 or 7 years old. Full disclosure: there was a reward for memorizing it: the Sunday school teacher gave you a Bible for your very own when you could recite it by heart. It worked: I did learn it at a young age.

And I'm not the only person who learned Psalm 23 at an early age. I will never forget one occasion when I was leading a service at a large retirement community. The service was actually a funeral service, for one of the residents. The room was full of quite elderly people who had gathered to bid farewell to one of their own. I was leading the service from my Book of Common Prayer. The congregation did not have prayer books:

since it wasn't a church there were no Prayer Books in the pews, so they were just listening as I read the service. When I got to the 23rd Psalm, which is often used at funerals, I started reading it out loud for them, from my copy of the BCP. "The Lord is my shepherd," I started to say, and then I noticed a kind of rumbling in the hall. I looked up to see what the rumbling was. What it was, was that just about everyone in the congregation was saying the Psalm aloud too! They knew it by heart. They didn't need a Prayer Book to recite Psalm 23. They already knew it! Maybe like me they had been caused to memorize it when they were six or seven years old. It suddenly dawned on me that these magnificent words of scripture had sustained the good folk in that retirement community through an entire lifetime. Over and over they had turned to those same words in their moments of need, and been strengthened. It was very moving to contemplate. I always think of it when the Psalm appears in our lessons, as it does today.

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.

What is it about the 23rd Psalm that has made it so beloved? Why do we treasure it so?

I think Psalm 23 is so revered because it reassures us about something we would love to believe, but aren't quite sure we have the right to believe; namely, that God is deeply and personally attentive to each and every one of us. That's right; little old me, and little old you: in the vast cosmos, so full of other things, God somehow watches over each one of us intimately, going before us and following after us, to be sure that we are cared for in every detail. Like a shepherd who almost anxiously focuses on one sheep at a time, the Lord watches over each of us tenderly.

Sounds great! But how can such a thing be true? Well, I don't know how it can be true, that is, how even God could be so concerned about me, given everything else God has to attend to. But I do know that if any bit of poetry can prove that it is true, Psalm 23 is the one. It is so beautifully expressed, it must be true.

And when Jesus came and walked among us in the flesh, it turns out that he behaved just like Psalm 23 says the Lord behaves. The Incarnate Word of God acted exactly like the attentive shepherd described so long before. Here is what Mark reports in his gospel:

As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

They laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Jesus taught them many things, and Jesus healed all the sick who were brought to him.

What did he teach that great crowd? Well, we know what he taught them, even if Mark doesn't give the exact words in this passage. Jesus taught them about what he called, the Kingdom of God. It was Jesus' favorite theme. This phrase, the Kingdom of God, emphatically does not mean where good people go when they die. That is a regrettable misunderstanding. No, the Kingdom of God is what happens when God takes charge, when God rules, here and now, while we are alive. The kingdom of God is when our heavenly shepherd actually gets involved, and starts doing all the kinds of things we have been hearing about.

The kingdom of God is when our heavenly shepherd goes into action, and heals, and walks with us, and comforts us, and leads us, and restores our souls, and all the rest.

Mark's brief description of what happened when Jesus stepped out of his boat and had compassion on the crowds, is a perfect example of, "the Kingdom of God." First Jesus taught about the Kingdom, and then he enacted it through his compassion.

I said a minute ago that people love Psalm 23 because it tells of the Lord's very personal loving attention. The Psalm reassures me that God loves me in a very intimate way. But Jesus' acting-out of the Kingdom of God also reminds us of another dimension. The kingdom of God is not just about me.

It is about everybody. The Lord loves and attends to all: and invites us to share in the caring. We are invited to be as attentive to one another, once we have been attended to, as the Lord has been attentive to us.

There is a hint about this in the passage from Mark. It turns out that all the sick people whom Jesus healed, were brought there by other people.

When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

Jesus had helpers, in other words. The able-bodied worked really hard for the sake of their sick loved ones. They “rushed about.” They carried “the sick on mats.” Carrying someone on a mat is hard work. It probably took four people to carry one sick person, and some of them no doubt came a long distance. They must have been tired and sore afterwards. This is a very activist picture of members of the flock helping each other. It is not just the Shepherd who is at work; the sheep are fellow workers with the Shepherd.

So the image of Jesus tending to his flock goes both ways. It reassures us of the unbelievable degree of interest that God takes in each one of us, personally. This reassurance can last a lifetime. And it calls on us, to take a similar degree of interest in one another. This gives us work and purpose for a lifetime. God shepherds us, and also gives us the privilege to be shepherds to others; and thus to step into the green pastures of a love that never ends.

Before I finish I want to mention something new going on here at St James that is kind of like the scenario I am describing. It is an exciting development that involves members of the flock caring for one another under the guidance of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, and it is just about to get started.

The new thing is the formation of something called a Parish Discernment Committee, and I'm telling you about it so that everyone can keep it in prayer. A Parish Discernment Committee is the first step for a person who is exploring a possible calling of some sort. The way it works is that someone who feels perhaps called to be ordained, or possibly called to something, but isn't sure what—such a person makes themselves known to the priest in charge of the congregation. If, after some conversation, it seems good to proceed, the priest in charge, working with the Bishop of the diocese of Montana, convenes the committee. The Parish Discernment Committee works in a very organized and prayerful way for about six months. At the end of that time the Committee and the seeker come to an agreement about what the next steps should be for that person. It is called a discernment committee, because their work is to discern the will of the Holy Spirit in this case. It may be to enter an ordination program, or something else, God knows, we just try to discern.

Here at St James, the person who is feeling called to explore a vocation is long time member Mary Ann Nicholas. She spoke to me a couple of months ago and we have been working since then to get things started. But four other members have agreed to be part of the team: Sara Zitzer,

Kathryn Hatch, Sharon Morehouse, and Jesse Newby, who is new here in Dillon but whom I have known for several years.

The committee will have a training session by Zoom tomorrow evening, and then they are off and running. They will find their own way, led by the Good Shepherd and the Holy Spirit. Their work will be confidential, of course, so the rest of us won't hear much about it until they have some results to share. Maybe in January we will learn more from them. It will be work for them, but, I think, of a very rewarding kind. All the members of the team, not just Mary Ann, will feel the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. All of them will learn more about how the Good Shepherd is working in their lives. So it will be exciting to find out how it goes.

In the meantime, do keep this process in your prayers. Don't pry, just pray. In this way you too will have a share in the mutual care of the flock for one another. And may the Lord lead us all in the paths of righteousness.