

Faith Mennonite Church
April 13, 2008 ~ Easter 4

Green Pastures and Gatekeepers
Psalm 23; John 10:1-11

Next to the Lord's prayer, the 23rd Psalm is probably the most memorized passage of scripture among Christians. It is a Psalm that many people turn to at times of death or tragedy. We may not think of drawing on it in ordinary times because the imagery of a shepherd is no longer ordinary. City folk could easily live a whole lifetime without seeing a sheep, and even if we take an annual excursion out to Galewoods Farm to see the spring lambs, we probably won't notice anyone who is identifiably a shepherd, except for the sheep dog. We likely won't see anyone with a long staff leading the sheep out of the corral and off into a high mountain meadow.

So why does this Psalm continue to comfort? Why haven't poets written new lyrics using security metaphors of our times... computer virus protection, home security alarm systems, Master Card, vehicle airbags and gps systems... We certainly don't lack for protective devices and precautions, nor for catchy advertizing jingles. Yet, in times of crisis, it is not these things or their advertisements that we turn to. Rather we turn to other people and the security of relationships.

Psalm 23 is a Psalm of security and provision. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. She makes me lie down in green pastures; she leads me beside still waters, she restores my soul. The kind of restoration that most of us seek when we look for green pastures, or quiet waters, when we take our vacations to the wilderness and to water, is an emotional and spiritual restoration – decreasing our stress, slowing our pace. But green pastures and still waters for a sheep mean physical sustenance – grass to eat; water to drink, not simply behold. And while we tend to use our vacation and restoration times as an opportunity to escape from other people and to get away by ourselves, each individual sheep is led to food and water within a flock of sheep. So rather than a picture of retreat, these opening verses of Psalm 23 are a vision of everyday life when God is our Shepherd. The good life is one lived in community with a guarantee of basic food and safe, clean water. And the Psalmist trusts God to provide these because God's reputation is at stake...God leads us in right paths for her name's sake.

But we know that the good life is never static. Even when all of our basic physical needs are met, we can still find ourselves walking through a dark valley. The King James' Version, which some of us older ones memorized as children, spoke of the "valley of the shadow of death." Another translation is simply the "darkest valley." While we can't know exactly the Psalmist's intent, these words seem to capture the whole range of despair or tragedy we might face. It may be death, as we have so recently experienced. It can also be the darkness of depression. It can be the insecurity of losing one's job at little or no notice...or the fear that one's job may no longer be secure. It might be a severed relationship, a rejection, or a betrayal. It may be a false accusation. It can be physical pain with no immediate alleviation despite all of the advances of modern medicine. It can be the loss of a dream or the need to choose between several dreams. Whatever the darkness, the deepest darkness, the darkest valley, the Psalmist says, "I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.

In a day of police brutality captured on videotape, of images of riot policemen in Burma and Tibet beating back Buddhist monks and peaceful protesters with sticks, it's not altogether easy to think of a rod and a staff as tools that comfort. But if we were all silly lambs (and most

accounts are that these are not highly intelligent beasts), prone to wander away, slip off a cliff and get hung up in some scraggly bushes, we would likely be grateful for a shepherd's crook of the staff around our neck, pulling us back to safety. Again, it is the relationship, the promise of presence, that gives comfort. This Shepherding God doesn't offer missile defense shields, or magically remove all threats, but promises to walk along with us through the darkness and the evil. We do not have to fear.

In the closing lines the Psalmist changes the metaphor. God moves from Shepherd to Sheik or host,ⁱ spreading a wonderful banquet and blessing his guest with overflowing ointment and wine. Whether in the meadow as a sheep or at the table as a guest, we are accompanied by God, our companion whose presence guides us through danger and the ill intentions of our enemies. And just as the meadows are a communal place for the sheep, the Psalmist speaks of living in the "house of the Lord" or the temple – the community of God's people. These are not solitary paths we walk, but a shared experience of God with others.

For the Psalmist, saying "The Lord is my shepherd" was also a political statement, not unlike the early Christian proclamation that "Jesus is Lord." In ancient times, kings were often referred to as the shepherd of the people. Old Testament prophets often railed against kings who neglected their responsibility as shepherds, not providing food, shelter, and safety. To proclaim, "The Lord is my shepherd," was "to declare one's loyalty to God and intention to live under God's reign, even while earthly kings didn't always fulfill their responsibilities."ⁱⁱ

Questions of allegiance and trust are also at stake in the discourse we read from John 10 this morning, where Jesus refers to shepherds, gates and sheepfolds. The writer of John follows a pattern, particularly in the first half of the book where there is first an account of a miracle, which is followed by a dialogue, and then a discourse. Our scripture this morning is the discourse that follows a dialogue with the religious leaders following the miracle of Jesus' healing the man who was blind from birth. You may recall the miracle and the dialogue, which ended up quite comedic—the man who can't see becomes a person with vision while the religious leaders, who have eye sight, are spiritually blind and can't accept what Jesus is doing.

This is the backdrop to Jesus' words about the relationship between true and false shepherds of the people. A true shepherd, an authentic leader is one who comes in the front door, works in the open, and is welcomed by the sheep because she knows each of the sheep by name and the sheep recognize her voice. In the story of Jesus healing the blind man, the religious leaders keep calling the man and his parents in for interrogation. Obviously they do not have a relationship of trust. The leaders don't believe what the man and his parents say and the parents are reluctant to give out much information.

Jesus, on the other hand, talks to the young man, not as a disabled person, not as someone marginalized, but as one worthy of love, compassion and conversation. His interactions with this man are life-giving.

A good number of conflicts that exist in our and other denominations emerge when leaders and people do not trust each other, or when one segment of the church thinks it holds truth over another. A concern with following rules and maintaining tradition can trump the life-giving experiences of those who are tending sheep in new pastures with different realities.

But Jesus stands to correct this tendency by taking the role not just of shepherd, but also gate to the sheepfold. Jesus controls the flow of the flock in and out of the safe spaces of the sheepfold, not through the strict and uncompromising rules of the religious leaders of his day, but by allowing entrance to anyone who listens, recognizes his voice and wishes to follow. And

Jesus doesn't hold people within the strict confines of one location, but as the sheep come in and go out to find pasture, Jesus gives them abundant life.

And finally, Jesus the Good Shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. The kings of old and the leaders of today, rarely put themselves in a position of vulnerability. They conscript young men, and women, to fight the wars to preserve their power. But Jesus calls us all into an upside-down kingdom, where we gain through giving and losing, where we trust in love rather than fear. Let us rest in green pastures; let us enjoy abundant life as we follow Jesus through the gate and introduce others to his voice of welcome.

ⁱ Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry, ed. David W. Cotter. Liturgical Press, 2001 (p. 58-59)

ⁱⁱ New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. 4

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