

2021 11 24 My Shepherd
Eternity Sunday, TUMC
Psalm 23 - God is my shepherd

When was the last time you saw a shepherd? I haven't seen a shepherd in years. On Sundays I bike ten kilometers to get here, and I don't see a single shepherd along the way... or any sheep. Shepherds are essentially mythical creatures to me. I probably spend more time thinking about werewolves than I do about shepherds. But maybe I'm in the minority. What about this - come find me after this, and tell me about a shepherd you know. I'd love to know what ideas and associations you have.

Because, when I read the Bible, I see a lot about shepherds and sheep. Take these words we spoke together, Psalm 23, words that have been prayed, sung, and translated for millenia. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Shepherd and sheep is one of the primary metaphors for the relationship of God to Their People, and it shows up throughout scripture - and throughout our rhythm of worship.

Did you know that last year, we read Psalm 23 three times in church? In March, June, and on this same Eternity Sunday. Then, once each in 2019 and 2018, three times in 2017, twice in 2016, and I had to go back to 2012 to find a year when we didn't read it once. And that's not counting teaching it in Sunday School, reciting it at funerals, and singing music inspired by these lines.

Why do we reach for this image in times of turmoil and grief? Why are these words such a comfort?

A shepherd is a protector. They take the sheep out beyond the town walls and the cultivated land, so that they can graze. Danger lurks out there. Wild animals, outlaws and bandits, enemies and rivals, not to mention the possibilities of accident or injury, far from help. The shepherd watches the horizon, anticipates the weather, and counts the sheep. When confronted by threat and peril, who would not want the comfort of a protector?

I haven't seen a lot of shepherds in my life, but I have seen goat farmers on the rocky hills of Palestine. I've watched them scan the horizon for danger. These days the lions and bears of Biblical time aren't such a threat - instead, unfriendly neighbours harass them and their children, poison their flocks and syphon their water. The ancient shepherd weapons, a few stones in a sling, which worked so well

for a boy called David, are not a helpful response when the enemy is ideologically determined to drive you away from your homeland.

So the goat herders watch the hills and horizons, and somehow have time to welcome friends and strangers who come in peace. You feel safe when you are with them. They share their bread and fruit. Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, who does not run away when danger comes, who stays with the sheep, and even lays down his life for the sheep. When danger threatens, our God does not promise to smite our enemies. Our God promises to feed us and stay with us. You prepare a table in the presence of enemies. That is the nature of God, our protector and provider.

I hope you know that you can call upon God to be with you, to care for you, when you are faced with aggression, violence, and diminishment. This is a time in the history of the world when fear is stoked and spread. When we take a stand for the dignity and rights of our siblings, when we see violence at home and abroad, when we see the escalation of crisis and collapse and the human hands stirring the pot and pointing the gun and hoarding the wealth, we are not alone. We have a protector. A provider.

Those Palestinian goat herders, they know the land. Their ancestors knew it too, as did the ancestors of their goats! And they watch the growing greenery in the rocky soil, weighing the hunger of their animals against the need of the grasses to establish and root deeply.

Working together, the sheep and the shepherd tend to the land. They graze the larger plants. They fertilize the soil and trample pathways along the hillsides.

The shepherd knows the land, is thinking about the route ahead, the potential dangers, and the places of rest. The sheep know some things too. Sheep are not as stupid as they have been made out to be. But, they are also not as clever as they think they are, and sometimes the sheep even encourage each other in bad behaviour. The shepherd tries to avoid those situations with awareness and attention.

This attention and care are aspects of our God, who brings us into green pastures and strongly encourages us to take a nap when it's needed. God nourishes body, mind, and soul. I hope you are fully nourished today, with good food, safe water, and

a heart that draws on the source of wholeness and peace. Our God nourishes us with attentive care.

Sheep being what they are, and the world being what it is, we depend on each other for safety. Sometimes that dependency becomes a problem. We can get cliquish and careless, we sometimes flock together and overgraze an area. The Book of Ezekiel asks 'Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of the pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink the clear waters? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?'

We can be careless, greedy, harmful, selfish. The Bible does not deny this. It seems that sometimes when we are together with others, our collective intelligence and capacity for creativity diminishes. We fixate on shared fear. Our worst impulses lurk. Yet. Even though we are walking in the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear evil. Our shepherd walks with us, guiding us through the narrow place where the winds are still and the light is dim. By striking the walls of the canyon, the rod in one hand, the staff in the other, the shepherd guides the sheep in number, focusing our attention on what matters - getting through to the other side.

Our shepherd guides us. I hope you experience God's guidance in your life, not just in the big life-making choices, but in the immediate and ordinary matters, in how you treat your neighbours, where you spend your money, and what media you consume. We get it wrong, and then we get grace to try again. The Apostle Peter betrayed Jesus in his words and his actions, and Jesus offered him in return his anointing, his direction - feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

In the ethical teachings of Jesus and the prophets, in the intricate details of the Law, in the fierce truth of the Holy Spirit, in the stories of our ancestors in the faith, in the discernment we do together, God prompts us to make better choices, aiming for faithfulness and righteousness. We ourselves cannot establish justice on earth, or mend the broken covenants, or uproot the evils of racism and greed. But we also do not need to fear these evils. They are not bigger than God. God is wiser, and is leading us out.

The journey God takes us on is a good one, but it is not easy. Hardship takes its toll. Members of the flock fall sick, they grow tired, they face the natural effects of age and the impact of long struggle. It's not just that we fail. We succeed, sometimes doing the impossible, and it has a cost.

We remember that, today. Remembering is sometimes part of our resistance. We remember the dead of wars. We remember the deaths of transgender people and the ongoing vulnerability of marginalized identities. We remember those who are disappeared for their inconvenient politics.

And remembrance is a practice of love, and a duty of truth. We remember those close to our hearts and our lives, whose losses join our human experience in the abiding love of our God. Today we remember together, witnessing the love, and grief, and pain that each of us carries. By doing this, we hope we can carry these griefs together. And we also name the areas in our lives where we need healing.

You anoint my head with oil, and my cup overflows. Oil and wine, for cleaning wounds and for healing the wounded. Anointing with oil is one of the most beautiful symbols of God's Spirit working amongst us. Some Anabaptist traditions have taken a dim view of it. But the Bible is clear that anointing with oil is used to commission kings, sanctify prophets, and heal the sick. The most important people of our community - those who offer oversight, those who speak God's word, and those who are wounded. These are the ones who set our agenda, who determine what we do as the Body of Christ.

If you are someone who is in need of healing - and we all are, at one time or another - and especially today if you are carrying grief and sorrow and fear, you are the very heart of our community. You are anointed to this calling. If your cup is nearly empty, if you are low on hope or energy or inspiration - and we all are, at one time or another - be assured that God wants to supply your needs. In our weakness, God's strength is made known.

Our shepherd is a protector, a nourisher, a guide, and a healer. This is the shepherd who lays down their life for the sheep. This is the nature and the joy of our God.

Surely. Truly. Certainly. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of my God forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.