

“Standing Around” GPPC 4-17-16
Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30

In two of the scripture readings this morning, you may have noticed the same word used. That word is not found in the third reading, but it is strongly implied by the context. And despite all the children’s sermons you’ve ever heard, the answer is not “Jesus.” Does anybody know which word it is? It starts with s. The word is shepherd.

The word shepherd is used a lot in the Bible. Sometimes it’s used as an image for God or Jesus. Sometimes it’s used for leaders. But most of us don’t have much experience with shepherds and sheep. I’m reminded of an episode in the 1970s TV comedy/drama series MASH. Mobile Army Surgical Hospital surgeons in the Korean War, Hawkeye Peirce and BJ Honeycutt are used to operating on human beings. But one day they’re asked to go work on an injured horse. As they creep up and eye the snorting, stomping animal, both doctors are a little nervous. Hawkeye says to BJ, “You know anything about horses?” BJ says, “I stepped in some manure once.” “Ok,” says Hawkeye, “You’re in charge.”

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You know anything about sheep and shepherds? Not that much. But over and over the Bible tells us that God is our Shepherd and Jesus is the Good Shepherd. What does that mean? And how do we respond?

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” says the Psalmist.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures...leads me beside still waters...restores my soul...leads me in the right path...” In other words, God provides everything we need. Food, drink, rest, and restoration. Guidance in making the right ethical decisions. As one writer puts it, “... The shepherd’s staff has two useful ends: a crook for drawing the sheep away from danger, and a blunt end for prodding them toward places they would rather not go. A good shepherd both protects and agitates as needed, both gathers in for shelter and leads out to graze in new pastures.” (Austin Crenshaw Shelley in *The Christian Century*, March 30, 2016, 19.)

Have you ever felt God draw you away from danger and protect you? Have you ever experienced God prodding you to go where you did not want to go? Has God ever used a Christian leader to shepherd you to safety or to push and agitate you to grow? Let’s hope so. Let’s hope so.

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“Even if I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; because you’re with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” So in the scariest times of our life, maybe even when we face death, we’re given courage that comes from beyond our own strength, courage that comes from God’s presence.

Many of you may recall hearing about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s experience. On a Friday night, January 27, 1956, King was at home, exhausted from his labors for civil rights. The phone rang; an anonymous voice threatened King with death unless he left Montgomery. Fear gripped King as he hung up the phone. He walked to his kitchen, his hands shaking, and made some coffee, and then sat down at the kitchen table.

He writes, "I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud."

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"The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. 'I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.'"

"At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

(Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*.)

Again and again, the Psalmist reminds us that no matter who we are, God is our shepherd because God alone provides what we need.

Jesus is also called a shepherd. In the 10th chapter of John's gospel, he tells the people he's the good shepherd who lays down his life for the

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sheep (v.11). He says he has come to bring people abundant life, life that is full and rich and overflowing. How wonderful!

But then this morning we see Jesus walking in the temple in Jerusalem, in the portico of Solomon. And John says “the Jews” gather around Jesus and begin to ask him questions.

If you were here a couple of Sundays ago, you may remember whenever John refers to “the Jews,” he’s probably talking about a group of elite Judean religious leaders of the time who are opposed to Jesus. He is *not* talking about all the Jews of his time or the Jews who are our elder brothers and sisters in faith today.

John says these elite religious leaders gather around Jesus; they’re standing around Jesus. But the Greek here is actually more expressive. It means “to move so as to encircle an object, surround, encircle with hostile intent.” “How long will you keep us in suspense?” these leaders sneer, “If you’re the Messiah, tell us plainly.” So these folks have not come to Jesus to learn. They’ve not come to receive abundant life. They’ve come to encircle and attack from all sides. And that is

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something not confined to a few elite religious leaders of the 1st century.

It's a danger for us as well.

It's easy for us to say we are Christians. But then when Christ, the Good Shepherd of the sheep, prods us to live differently than we are resistant. "Give up my Sunday morning to worship you? Who do you think you are?" "Study Holy Scripture in a group? I learned all I need to know in middle school." "Be pushed to learn about and respond to the great justice issues of our day because I am a follower of Jesus? Act for justice and mercy even when there is opposition? I have better things to do with my time." But Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." He challenges us, doesn't he?

So we come to the Book of Revelation, this strange biblical literature that unveils, reveals a reality beyond the reality we see with our human eyes. John of Patmos, the writer, lives in a time when the Roman Empire is beginning sporadic persecution of Christians. It will eventually become horrific and widespread. But with weird, symbolic language and pictures the message of the Book of Revelation is clear. Do not abandon the faith. Because of the life, death, and resurrection of

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Jesus, evil's time is limited and God's victory is assured, even if it does not always seem that way.

John paints the scene for us. It's the throne room of heaven. Who is there? Just a couple of folks who squeaked their way past Saint Peter? No. A great multitude of people, beyond counting, from every nation, people, language. And what are they doing? They are standing around. But this time they are not standing around, encircling Jesus in an attack. No. They are standing around the throne, falling on their faces, singing to God and to the Lamb. They are worshiping.

Who are these people? As fundamentalist writers suggest, are they folks who have been whisked away from life's difficulties, raptured up to avoid the trouble and demands of faithful life? No. These are people who have been through the ordeal of faithfulness. These are people who have given their lives in faithfulness to God and the Lamb. So the one who is our shepherd, provides for them once again—no more hunger, no more thirst, no more pain and death. And no more tears, because God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

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But sometimes it is hard to hold onto our faith, isn't it? We scan the newspaper with its headlines of the murder of an innocent couple, of drive-by shootings, of corruption, of hatred and violence. On NPR the other day, I heard the story of a girl in El Salvador. When she was thirteen years old, in order to avoid having her family members murdered, she was forced to marry a gang member. Now at age fifteen she has two children and has been forced to take drugs. No wonder people are trying to leave El Salvador to find safety.

And where are those girls abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria two years ago?

And our personal stories are not so dramatic, but each one of us has our own heartaches and struggles, don't we? Sometimes life is not easy, is it? Sometimes it's hard to keep our faith, isn't it?

But Revelation invites us to see the world through the eyes of faith, and to know that the suffering and injustice we experience now are not the last word. The last word is spoken by the one who is our shepherd who will give us what we need—food, drink, rest, restoration, and courage beyond what we can imagine. The last word is spoken by God

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who sits on the throne and the Lamb who comforts and makes new, and whose kingdom will have no end. The one seated on the throne guides our lives, prodding us to put our lives into God's ministry of justice and mercy.

How is your life these days? Is it going pretty smoothly? Good for you. Be grateful for the shepherd who provides for our every need. Is your life difficult? Turn to the shepherd who can give you whatever you need for the moment. Turn to that shepherd and ask for what you need.

On the Internet I saw a troubling photo. It showed a group of Coptic Christians about to be beheaded by terrorists who claim they are being faithful to Islam, but who are not. They're actually killing more Muslims than anyone else and they are only being faithful to evil. These evil terrorists were leading a group of Christians out to be beheaded. But one of the Christians they were going to kill was smiling. He was smiling as they were standing around because he saw a reality beyond human eyes. They worshiped and sang, "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." ©Jeff Paschal