

“Strange Shepherd” GPPC 5-12-19
Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17

My wife, the lovely and talented Beth, is a fine knitter. She knits hats, socks, sweaters, and several of the stoles I wear in worship at the traditional service. About a year ago, she began to think about how satisfying it would be to knit something from wool she had personally sheared from a sheep and then spun into yarn herself. She learned about a farm in Liberty, North Carolina, not far from Greensboro, that allowed people to visit and watch while folks shear sheep.

So one sunny, semi-warm February morning, we got into the car and drove out to the place, wandered down to one of the barns, and sure enough, there were people shearing sheep. The shearers were an older man-wiry and tough, and a younger middle-aged woman, also tough. We learned that the man was considered one of the top sheep shearers in the country, and the woman was his student.

Now as you may know, full grown sheep are big, 160 up to about 200 pounds, like giant squatty dogs with extra hair. A bunch of these sheep were milling around in a section of the barn near us. And every

Jeff Paschal

few minutes, the man would go over and grab a sheep, pull it over to the plywood platform cutting area, and in one quick motion wrestle it into a sitting position, with the man behind it. Then the man snipped the wool away with the hand shears as fast as lightning. And then he would push the sheep onto its side to finish the job. It was impressive.

Meanwhile, the woman did the same thing, but it took a little longer (she was a student) and sometimes she had to wrestle the sheep more than once. We were impressed with her too.

What struck Beth and me about the process was how physically demanding and dirty it was. The work took some personal commitment. The shearers didn't hurt the sheep, but they didn't coddle them either. The shearers, just like shepherds, were the boss, not the sheep. And the sheep understood this.

This Fourth Sunday of Easter in the lectionary year is sometimes also referred to as "Sheep Sunday" or "Shepherd Sunday" because all four of the Bible readings (including the two we just heard) use the image of sheep and shepherds. We'll look at the 23rd Psalm and

Jeff Paschal

Revelation 7. But be forewarned we're dealing with a strange and wonderful shepherd.

We read the 23rd Psalm at many funerals, because it is so comforting and so beautiful. Some of you may have memorized it at some point, maybe in the King James Version of the Bible, as I have.

It begins with a familiar image and a treasured promise. "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."

God is depicted not as a shepherd in general but as "my" shepherd, your shepherd. God has a personal relationship with each of us. We are not mere numbers to God. We are known and named by God.

And who are we, you and I, in the Psalm? Well, we're sheep. Baah! This is a radical image in our proud day, isn't it? "It's a free country. Nobody can tell me what to do." "I don't need any of that God, Bible, church, and worship stuff. I've outgrown all that. And I'll let my kids decide about God when they grow up." "We are independent, intelligent beings--just give us a little more time and we will figure out *all* the mysteries of the universe. Just give us time."

Jeff Paschal

Right.

But as we often recall at funerals, yes, some of us are extremely intelligent, industrious, caring, creative, and so on. And some of us wield a good bit of power on the earth—for a short time. But when all is said and done, we are all just sheep who rely on the Shepherd.

As the Psalmist says, “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.” Of course, we work hard to purchase the places we live in, what we wear, what we drive, eat and drink, and experience. Yes. But ultimately it all comes from the Shepherd as a gift. It’s all something we enjoy for a time, and then we will give it back. Even the ability to have our very being, our soul restored, comes not from something we can conjure up by positive thinking or by following the advice of a “life coach” or anything else. The Shepherd restoreth my soul and yours.

And our sense of right and wrong is not something we merely dream up either. The Shepherd “leadeth me in the paths of righteousness.” God works through an imperfect community of faith, the

Jeff Paschal

church, and through the rightly interpreted words of the Bible, and through our conscience developed over the years, to lead us in the right paths.

I was talking with one of you recently about a loved one who had died after a long life. And as we talked we were struck by the richness of this loved one's life—a quiet life of integrity and kindness that like a rock tossed into a pond sent waves of goodness radiating outward. And those waves will be felt for generations, as will our own lives.

Do we make mistakes? Of course. But there actually *is* a right path, if we will allow ourselves to follow, if we are humble enough to know we are not paragons of virtue. We are sheep who tend to wander off and get into trouble. We need a shepherd to come and find us and bring us home. And so the Shepherd does.

The Shepherd finds us, and not just when life is going well, the sun is shining, we're relaxing by the pool, holding a drink, and enjoying paradise. No. The Psalmist says, "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." The Psalmist says God is also with us

Jeff Paschal

when times are hard. Life is scary. We're sick. And maybe we're even facing death.

Another pastor says, "I remember sitting in a hospital room with a man from my congregation who was recovering from a severe stroke. He was telling me about all the other people from church who had visited him that week—several congregants who brought their hymnals and sang with him, another who brought his fiddle and played Appalachian tunes, others who stopped by on lunch breaks or after work. All those churchpeople, he mumbled to me, made it easier to believe in God. When they are with me, he said, I know God is with me. There at his bedside, I learned from this man that I can't separate how I think about church from how I think about God. The life of a congregation reveals the life of God." (Isaac S. Villegas in *The Christian Century*, online, April 14, 2015)

What is our congregation revealing about the life of God?

Then, all of a sudden, the Psalmist switches images from talking about a shepherd with sheep to talking about people at a table. The host

Jeff Paschal

at the table (as on communion Sundays) is God. But what an interesting gathering of people are there. “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...” Really? A table with my *enemies*? And notice what God does. “Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.” It’s an odd scene, isn’t it? What is the Psalmist trying to say?

Isn’t he saying that we shouldn’t kid ourselves? Sometimes we really do face enemies in this life. As Pastor William Sloane Coffin put it, “In contrast to many a preacher today, Jesus knew that ‘Love your enemies’ didn’t mean ‘Don’t make any.’” (William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, 152.)

If we speak the truth in love, we’re going to make enemies. If we hold people lovingly accountable, we’re going to make enemies. If we try to live God’s love with our personal lives and with the public policies we support or reject, we’re going to make enemies. And it’s hard sometimes.

But notice what happens. God is there with us throwing a banquet for us in the presence of our enemies. Anointing our head with oil. Our

cup runneth over. When we are aligned with God's loving ways, there is vindication from God. There is God's presence with us as we face enemies, whatever or whoever they may be.

And in the glorious and awesome language of the Book of Revelation in chapter 7, in heaven we see the angels, all God's people, all the saints, and all the martyrs who have died at the hands of those who have made themselves enemies of God, and enemies of God's church. They are all standing before the throne of God, before Jesus, the Lamb who was slain. And this assembled group stands and then bows in worship before the Lamb who then becomes the one who shepherds them. They worship the Lamb who shepherds them, guides them, and finally wipes away every tear from their eyes. Enemies will not have the last word. God will have that word, and it will be good.

The Psalmist ends by saying, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The Hebrew here is actually more expressive. It can be translated as, "Surely goodness and mercy shall *dog* me all the days of

Jeff Paschal

my life..." Have you ever felt dogged, *hounded* by the goodness and mercy of God?

Maybe you were determined to be angry and cynical, but God kept sending compassionate and joyful people into your life.

Or maybe you were feeling ungrateful, but then you came to worship and remembered God love for you and all the world in Jesus Christ and then you went for a walk and were stunned by the sound of birds singing, the scent of flowers, the beauty of a rainbow, the wind blowing on your face.

Or maybe you were feeling guilty, but then a voice from outside yourself spoke to you and said, "You are forgiven. You are loved just as you are with all your sins and flaws. Now get up, let go of your shame, and live again."

Have you ever been *hounded* by the goodness and mercy of God? That's what we are. In joyful times and in sorrowful times, God is with us, anointing us with oil, our cup overflowing, and we will be with God forever.

Jeff Paschal

Many years ago, when I was a pastor in another town, I used to go once a month and lead a Bible study at a Lutheran retirement village.

We started with just a few people, but over time the group grew and we had around twenty or so folks showing up for a Bible study and discussion group. We sat in a big circle and had fun talking, laughing, and thinking. I looked forward to our time together and I think they did too.

One day, one of the guys in the group, I suppose he was in his early 80s, brought me a surprise gift. He brought this picture that he had painted, and now hangs near the desk in my study. [Show the painting to the congregation.] As you can see, the painting was primitive, the work of a novice, certainly not something a professional or semi-professional could produce. But the man had spent his time and energy painting it for me. It's a scene of sheep grazing on a hillside of green grass, with mountains, a blue sky, and cotton balls of clouds floating in the background. I was touched that this man had painted this for me. And I was even more touched when I looked on the back of the picture frame

Jeff Paschal

to see the date, October 3, 1999, the painter's name, and the painting's title: "Shepherd Wanted"

In a world full of joy and sorrow, truth and deception, clarity and bewilderment, we are sheep who want and need shepherd. But the good news is that the Shepherd wants us too, has found us, and will never lose us. We will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And one day we will join those around the throne singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen!" ©Jeff Paschal