

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
March 2, 2008
4th Sunday in Lent
Psalm 23

I hope by featuring different voices and different translations you were able to hear Psalm 23 anew this morning. For it goes without saying that this Psalm is a powerful and deeply moving Scripture for many of us. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that it is almost presumptuous to even try and comment on this Psalm. Its familiarity can make any commentary seem superfluous. But I am willing to take that risk with you this morning. For this Psalm has something to say to us during this refocusing season of Lent.

It is my hope that by examining Psalm 23 anew, we might rescue it from merely being the beloved Psalm for memorial services. Indeed, this Psalm is such comfort for families and friends who are grappling with the death of a loved one. We even have a funeral bulletin cover that depicts this Psalm—it is a picture of white and wooly sheep, grazing in a green valley. The words “The Lord is my Shepherd” stand at the top in italicized script. It is a lovely scene and it makes for a beautiful bulletin. However, if the only time we really consider this Psalm is in the midst of death, then we are missing its power to shape us in the midst of our lives. For Psalm 23 is not only a comforting psalm. It is also a subversive psalm. Psalm 23 is a psalm of rebellion.

“*The Lord is my Shepherd.*” Now, I know what some of you are thinking. “Shannon—how on earth is claiming that the Lord is my Shepherd subversive in any way?” When we think “shepherd,” we think about idyllic pastoral scenes—scenes like the one on our funeral bulletin. A shepherd overseeing a bunch of sheep does not sound rebellious. But, first impressions can be deceiving. The title “Shepherd” in the Bible is not simply a job description. The title “Shepherd” is political. In the ancient world, kings were known as the shepherds of their people. This was because a king was supposed to provide for and protect the people under his reign, like what a shepherd was charged to do for a flock. But we know from Scriptures like Ezekiel 34 that kings often failed to do what they were called to do.

In Ezekiel, the prophet denounces the actions of the kings saying, “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?... You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.” In the ancient world, in the world in which our Scriptures were formed, the title “Shepherd” was political.

Therefore, this Psalm is subversive right off the bat. For when the Psalmist states unequivocally “*The Lord is my Shepherd,*” he is stating just as strongly, “And the rest of you are **not.**” In this simple opening line, the Psalmist is metaphorically drawing the line in the sand. By claiming Yahweh as Shepherd, the Psalmist is claiming that Yahweh is king, sovereign, lord, authority, the one who directs, to whom he is answerable, whom alone he trusts and serves¹. Are you getting a taste of the rebellion yet?

When we say “*The Lord is my Shepherd,*” we are saying there is no rival loyalty, no competing claim for our allegiance. When we say “*The Lord is my Shepherd,*” we are saying that our ultimate allegiance is to our Creator—not to country, or to denomination, or to military, or to capitalism, or even to family. Our ultimate allegiance belongs first and foremost to Yahweh, to our God.

“*The Lord is my Shepherd*” is a subversive and political claim. And, I don’t know about you, but that claim feels even more charged these days—in the middle of a lively election season, a time of economic fluctuation, a time of war and rumors of war. For when I pay close attention, I hear many voices out in

the marketplace that are clamoring for my ultimate allegiance. But then I hear the voice of Psalm 23. “*The Lord, Yahweh, is my Shepherd,*” the Psalmist asserts. No one and nothing else.

But the rebellion does not stop with that opening line. It continues. “*The Lord is my Shepherd. Therefore, I shall not want.*” The literal translation is “I shall lack nothing.” I don’t know how much television you watch, or how many magazines you read, but I know from my over-exposure to those things that there is apparently always something that I lack. According to all the ads, there is always something else that I need, that my children need, that we must have in order to be satisfied and full. I mean, didn’t I really **need** my cute red Mustang? Don’t you really **need** that next trip, or the new pair of shoes, or the Nintendo Wii? Don’t we really **need** those things in order to be okay, in order to be happy, in order to be successful? Not according to Psalm 23.

“*The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.*” With those few words, the Psalmist makes two powerful claims. First, he claims that God’s generosity will provide all he needs to live abundantly. We hear reverberations of this claim from Jesus’ own lips in the challenging Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew. “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...” Jesus’ words, the Psalmist’s words, are drastically different from what we hear every day.

And I would be hypocritical if I did not admit that this is an area in which I deeply struggle to practice what I preach. It is an area in which I fail daily. It is extremely difficult to unplug one’s self from the greed and idolatry of accumulation. But that is exactly what the Psalmist is doing. He is unplugging. When the Psalmist says “I shall not want,” not only is he saying that God’s generosity will provide, but he is also making the choice **not** to want. The Psalmist is making the choice **not** to get caught up and defined by the powers and principalities of consumerism. It is a subversive claim and choice, especially in this day and age. “*The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.*”

The Psalmist then goes on to show us with images how the Lord, our Good Shepherd, provides for our lives. “*The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures; the Lord leads me beside still waters, the Lord restores my soul. The Lord leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.*” While many of us have heard these verses as being primarily about peace and tranquility, they are also about much more. As Kenneth Bailey has written, “In the Holy Land, pastures are green each year for a maximum of two and ½ months in the middle of winter. The rest of the year the fields are brown. Sheep are afraid to drink from a moving stream lest it hide deep water into which they could fall and drown. Still waters and green pastures are, for a sheep, the best of all worlds.ⁱⁱ”

These two verses are the Psalmist’s way of illustrating to us that the Lord, our good Shepherd, will keep us alive. The Lord, our good Shepherd, will give us all we need—good food, good water, good paths. We, the sheep, will lack nothing that we **need** for life. Furthermore, notice that all the action is on the part of the Shepherd. We, the sheep, do nothing. We simply receive and enjoy. “No hunger, no thirst, no fear, no anxiety, no danger. ‘All is well’ because there is one shepherd who is trusted.ⁱⁱⁱ”

Furthermore, if for some reason we wander off, the good Shepherd will find us and carry us back to the right path. But the Shepherd does this not because of who we are, but because of who the Shepherd is, for his own name’s sake, for the sake of God’s own integrity. Again, we hear echoes of Jesus in this description, particularly in Jesus’ parable of the Lost Sheep in which he describes the Shepherd leaving the 99 and going to find the one sheep that had gone astray (Matthew 18).

There is a story about a Christian missionary to China named Andrew Roy. He was in China before the Revolution but chose to stay even after the Communist takeover in 1950. When that takeover happened, he was placed under house arrest. As he was being interrogated, the people doing the questioning attacked the person of Jesus by noting the parable of the Lost Sheep. They argued that the act of leaving

the entire flock to go off and find one sheep was utterly foolish and completely irresponsible. It was the collective mass of the 99 remaining sheep that mattered.

In response, Roy pointed out that when the good shepherd goes after the one lost sheep he gives ultimate security to the entire flock. Because then, each sheep sees and knows that if it gets lost, the Shepherd will come after it too. Knowing that just one lost sheep mattered so much to the Shepherd made all the difference to the entire flock^{iv}. Again—it is a subversive claim in a world that is often far too quick to simply leave or forget the ones who fall behind or who wander off.

We now reach the theological center of the psalm. “*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.*”

Here, at the center of the Psalm, we are promised that this good Shepherd, the only One in whom we trust, will never abandon us—not even in the most dangerous places. As a matter of fact, the good Shepherd transforms those dangerous places. For when God is present in the shadow of death, in the dark valley, things change. First, even in the darkness, the Shepherd is constantly guiding us and protecting us with the Shepherd’s tools -- the rod and the staff. The rod was a mace used to guard against danger from the outside. And the staff was a hook used to guide the sheep back to the right path. But guidance and protection are not all the good Shepherd does to transform the dark valley.

In the darkest of valleys, the good Shepherd also becomes gracious Host, transforming the barrenness of fear and anxiety into a feast of celebration and joy. And the good Shepherd turned gracious Host invites us to that feast as honored guest. But, could it also be that the good Shepherd turned gracious Host does not **only** invite **us** to the feast, but also those who we previously called enemy?

What if “*in the presence of my enemy*” does not mean the enemy is excluded and we feast “in their face,” so to speak. But what if “*in the presence of my enemy*” means they are invited too? What if the good Shepherd turned gracious Host, the One who holds nothing back from the sheep, not even his life, also holds no **one** back from the feast, not even those we knew as enemy? After hearing this Psalm anew this day, I certainly would not put it past our God, our Shepherd, our Host, to do something so full of grace and mercy, so out of the ordinary, so countercultural and subversive.

And then, our Psalm ends with two affirmations. “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*” The verb “follow” is actually a much stronger verb in the Hebrew. A better translation is “pursue.” “*Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life.*” We are being chased by the good Shepherd’s love, our whole lives long. It makes you wonder if there will come a day when we stop running from it.

“*And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*” And now, because of who our Good Shepherd is, we, the sheep, the guests, are now a part of God’s household, God’s family, God’s community, from now until forever.

I am not sure how you feel, but it will be hard for me to sentimentalize this Psalm anymore. It will be hard to look at the funeral bulletin cover without remembering its subversive nature. I don’t think I will ever say “*The Lord is my Shepherd*” in quite the same way again. Will you?

ⁱ Brueggemann Walter. *The Treat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness.* Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1996.

ⁱⁱ Bailey, Kenneth E. “Psalm 23 and Jesus”, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Feb 18, 2008, page 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brueggemann, Walter.

^{iv} Bailey, page 16.