

“A Shepherd’s Love”

Fourth Sunday after Easter
May 3, 2020

From the front pew of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

JOHN 10:1-6, 11-15

Matt Matthews

The Twenty Third Psalm has been called the Mona Lisa of the Psalms. It is the Sweet Melissa and Freebird of Southern Rock; the Chattanooga Choo Choo of the American Songbook. It is the Augusta National of golf clubs. It is the McLarran P-1 and Corvette of automobiles. It is the surf and turf of the menu. It is the Kentucky Derby of horse races. It is the Michael Jordan and Larry Bird of match-ups. It is the Jarling Custard Cup of ice cream joints. It is the... well, you get the idea. *The Mona Lisa of the Psalms*.

It is this Psalm that many of the faithful know by heart. If one is going to memorize scripture, this is the one often chosen. If one turns to scripture in hard times, it is to this revered passage that many of us seek.

We turn to it because we need it. We need to be reminded that God is our shepherd, our provider, our protector. That God is sovereign, loving, good, holy. We need to be reminded that God is God, and that God loves all creation—you and me.

Our soul *needs* restoring. So, the Psalm becomes a prayer for us. Lord you can restore my soul. Please do it. Please help me to trust. Please help me to follow your vision to the still waters.

Anne Lamotte says one of the great prayers is, “O God, help me, help me, help me.”

The 23rd Psalm reminds us that God can help, does help, has helped, will help. The Psalmist reminds us to be quiet. *To be still and know that I am God*. The Lord *is* my shepherd.

But it’s easy to get distracted. It’s easy for the noise of the news, and the anxiety of this uncertain pandemic to fill our whole being.

The Psalmist draws us away from the voices and the powers and the demands . . . the Psalmist draws us to God.

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Jesus talked to Pharisees about how the Good Shepherd is the keeper of the sheep gate. The Good Shepherd knows the sheep. The Good Shepherd loves the sheep. The Good Shepherd would die for the sheep. The sheep know the voice of their Good Shepherd.

“Jesus used this figure of speech with [the disciples], but they did not understand what he was saying to them” (John 10:6).

Sheep are not known for their intelligence. So, Jesus is direct with his sheep/disciples. *I am the Good Shepherd. I am the keeper of the gate. I will protect you from the thieves and bandits who come to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly* (John 10:7-10).

Jesus can't hint any more directly that we should listen to his voice and follow. However, sheep don't always follow. They need to be herded. And that's the job of the Good Shepherd. The safety of the sheep doesn't depend on the sheep being faithful, but of the Shepherd being faithful.

The psalmist says that it is God as shepherd who:
makes me lie down
restores my soul
leads me in right paths
is with me
comforts me
prepares a table for me, AND
anoints.

The Good Shepherd doesn't leave us alone to our own devices.

And Jesus is the Good Shepherd the Psalmist talks about. Jesus has come to shepherd the flock.

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I've told you parts of this story before.

At Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center outside of Little Rock, Rev. Fred Babb the old camp director long ago had two dogs. One was named “Goodness.” One was named “Mercy.” They were German Shepherd Mutts. These dogs would follow you around. They'd greet the kids when they took their morning walks to the bath houses, camp store, and dining hall. They'd cozy up to you at the campfire every night and howl along with the camp songs. They'd rush through the forest trails with you, sit by the lake with you, beg food from you and sometimes steal your hot dogs. They'd turn up their noses when you'd offer them watermelon. They'd nuzzle your hand wanting you to pet them behind their ears.

At the camp gate—kind of like our sign out front that says “You are now entering your mission field”—there was a great sign. It said “Surely Goodness and Mercy shall follow you.”

Fred meant the dogs, of course. The dogs would follow you. They'd bark after your car until you outran them, and they'd limp back to camp.

But Fred also meant that God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit would follow you. The good shepherd would watch out for you. The good shepherd would keep his rod and staff handy. The good shepherd would provide.

A fair translation of this line is "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me," or "Surely goodness and mercy shall dog me" or "hound me." That's what shepherds do. They are close by. And a good shepherd always knows where the sheep are and what they need.

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So, we the church try to listen for the Good Shepherd's voice. We pray God's help that we follow the Good Shepherd's holy lead. Jesus reminds us that God comes from hell and back to walk by our side. Seemingly final things like death, and heavy things, like grave stones can't hold God back or down. Jesus says, "I am with you." The Good Shepherd says, "Follow me." Jesus our friend says, "Love one another like I love you."

We are called and invited to be faithful. But remember, and this is important. The Good Shepherd will be faithful even when we wander. The Good Shepherd is faithful even when we aren't. Remember, the Good Shepherd . . . *Follows me all the days of my life,*

And?

*And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long/forever.*

Thank God.

Amen.

Gospel: **JOHN 10:1-6, 11-15**

¹“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”
⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.