

Abundant Life

Through the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-18 Psalm 23
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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What do you picture in your mind when you hear the word shepherd? The Bible has a lot to say about shepherds. So, let's do a quick Bible study.

As we just heard from the Gospel of John, for instance, when applied to 'Jesus as the Good Shepherd' most of us picture the common image we grew up seeing in church school or in stained glass. Jesus' is clean and well-dressed with a flowing robe, a cute lamb held in his arms (or cradled across his shoulders), and a host of other sheep gathered around with not a speck of dirt on them. It gave the impression that being a shepherd was an idyllic walk in the meadows. Let's just say that biblical art can often be misleading and overly-sanitized. Being a shepherd, much like our image of the Wild West cowboy as portrayed in countless movies, has been overly-romanticized. Shepherding was a dirty vocation that involved times of hard labor. Think about it. Real life shepherding, again much like the cowboy, meant a lifestyle separated from the community for long stretches of time. Because of that, they were often viewed with suspicion by people in the cities and villages. They often were not even the owners of the flock but hired laborers. This would have been closer to the image that the ancient Hebrew people and those in Jesus' day would have pictured.

However, in the Old Testament there is another aspect of "shepherd" that is often overlooked. The church school curriculum, *Seasons of the Spirit*, explains it this way:

The term 'shepherd' served as a symbol for rulers – political and otherwise – in ancient Israel. When that connection is made by modern readers, it is often with David. David had been caring for his family's flock of sheep when he was summoned to appear before the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 16). It was the youngest child, David the shepherd boy, whom God through Samuel announced and then anointed as successor to King Saul. We usually leave the connection at that.

In ancient Israel, however, the king, considered the ruler of the flock of people, was never the *ultimate* authority. God remained the ruler above all rulers, even the anointed kings of Israel. The people, then, weren't actually the king's flock, but rather God's flock. This flock was simply entrusted to those who ruled. Psalm 100 states clearly, **"We are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture"** (Psalm 100:3). **Yet, sometimes the rulers forgot this, leading the flock in self-serving, oppressive, and even destructive ways.**

When you look at the primary role of **prophets** in the Bible, their job was to **critique Israel's political and religious leaders.** And critique they did! See if you can make any modern-day parallels.

"The shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, to their own gain, one and all" (Isaiah 56:11b).

"Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them" (Jeremiah 23:2).

"Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves" (Ezekiel 34:10).

These words do indeed sound like a modern-day critique of many current government and religious leaders. As a quick aside, **as one of those who sided with the teachers during their recent walkout, it's clearly obvious that those who shepherd this state have failed to feed the sheep. Without picking sides, I say it's time for new shepherds.**

It is against this biblical backdrop concerning the imagery of a shepherd that we turn to **Psalm 23** with its famous opening line, "**The Lord is my shepherd.**" In context, this declaration goes far beyond being just a comforting **pastoral statement**. It is also a **political statement!** Here's why. **To say that the Lord, or God, is my shepherd is to say that political and religious leaders ultimately are not.** It begs the question of you and me, **who or what do you turn to or follow as your shepherd?** In an era of such deep cultural divides and polarized ideologies – again both politically and theologically – it feels almost like a necessity to pick a side and allow ourselves to become shepherded by one extreme or another. Can we legitimately claim that it is God who is my shepherd?

In the Gospel of John we read the author's theological understanding of Jesus. In chapter 10 alone we encounter a couple of the many "I am" statements ascribed to Jesus. **"I am the gate** for the sheep...I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture...**I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly** (verse 7-10). This is an element of what the author means to experience eternal life in the here and now.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (verse 11). The passage goes on to warn that the hired hand runs away when the wolf comes, who in turn snatches and scatters the sheep. Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, released a commentary this week on the scripture readings from Psalm 23 and John 10. She warns of another danger to the sheep besides the wolf. It comes from within the sheepfold itself. She writes:

The flock doesn't need protection only from wolves coming from the outside, but also from the other sheep within the pen. Does the good shepherd not only stave off wolves but also mitigate between competing, ornery, petty, fallible, limited, sheep?

The comforting word in these shepherd texts is one of absence. Nowhere does it say that the sheep are well behaved or wise or worthy of the shepherd's sacrifice. In fact, Scripture reveals, as does experience, that those in the flock are prone to wander, greedy, ungrateful and unlikely to learn from their mistakes. The good shepherd lays his life down for them anyway. No equivocations. No qualifiers. **The shepherd binds up wounds, inflicted by wolf, flock-mate, circumstances and self alike.**

That's part of what it means when we claim that Jesus is the good shepherd. But there's more. Verse 16 states, "**I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**" This isn't to be read a Christian exclusivism. We already know that all people are God's people. Rather, **within the Christian community of faith the good shepherd is always expanding the flock.** The good shepherd seeks the lost, lonely, frightened, injured, the baffled, bewildered and shocked. The good shepherd feeds, binds together, and strengthens.

No, we are not the good shepherd. But we can learn from the ways of Jesus and apply such teachings to model our own life and ministry, personally and as a congregation. Duffield encourages:

The Good Shepherd who doesn't abandon us strengthens us to not abandon others.

The Good Shepherd who give us rest, feeds us and eats with us, binds up our wounds so that we can **bind the wounds of others with understanding, empathy and compassion.** The Good Shepherd doesn't give up on us and that means, on our good days, we **don't give up on each other.** And on those days when we simply can't stay a minute longer, when we storm away from the table and say we will never return, that same Good Shepherd goes and seeks us out, gives us rest, and brings us home again.

With these prophetic words, I'd like to close with some pastoral words, of which are also deeply engrained into today's scripture readings. Continuing to find myself drawn to poetry after its emphasis throughout the season of Lent, I found a paraphrase of Psalm 23 by Steve Garnaas-Holmes from unfoldinglight.com. It is my hope that these words speak to your heart, mind, and spirit.

Shepherd me, Love.

Lead me out from my attachments.

Lead me to the green meadow of your heart,
your deep well of peace and nourishment.

Fill me with your breath again,
breath of your Spirit.

Lead me in your way,
not mine,
even through darkest canyons
shadowed by death,

for your presence is my safety,
your will my comfort.

You invite me to your table with my enemies
to share with them your grace:

gift that overflows,
blessing that makes life beautiful.

Lead me where goodness and mercy go;
then on every road
I will still be at home in you.

Amen.