

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Fifth Sunday of Easter- May 7, 2023

Scripture lesson: Psalm 23

WE SHALL NOT WANT

“The Lord is my shepherd.” As Mike alluded to in the preface to today’s Scripture reading, those words, and Psalm 23 which they begin, are certainly among the Bible’s best-known.

My own understanding of them took a giant leap forward during the summer after my junior year of college. I was out west with my best friend from school, Ernie Reinhold. During part of our vacation time, we worked for his mother on her farm in Buhl, Idaho. On one of our days off, Ernie took me up into the hill country north of Buhl to see what we could see. Sure enough- on a narrow, rocky road a couple thousand feet up, we ran into a flock of sheep. We had to pull over as far to the side as we could to let the sheep and their shepherd pass by. It was the first honest-to-goodness “sheep with a shepherd” that I had ever seen.

Ernie told me about them. At that time, he and I were both thinking of becoming ministers, so he told me about them in connection with Psalm 23. The psalm has had much more meaning for me ever since.

Ernie said that a real-life shepherd lives day and night, the whole year round, with his sheep in the field. Each sheep has a name and each sheep knows the shepherd’s voice. When the shepherd calls, the sheep come.

The hill country north of Buhl is rocky and arid like many places in Israel. You can’t find good pasture or water just anywhere. A shepherd has to know where to find small patches of green grass. A shepherd has to know where to find still water because sheep have a hard time drinking from tumbling streams.

A shepherd has to know how to get safely from one place to another. Sheep don’t see well, so their legs often slip into crevices where they can easily break. A shepherd has to know smooth paths on which to move sheep without harm from one pasture to the next.

A shepherd also needs to know how to prepare a pasture. Sheep’s digestion is delicate. Their stomachs are quickly and easily upset by noxious weeds. Sheep also commonly cut their faces on briars when they eat. A shepherd has to pull weeds and trim briars before letting the sheep into a pasture. When in spite of a shepherd’s careful precautions, a sheep still cuts its face, the shepherd anoints its cuts with medicine to help them heal.

Take in and ponder all of that. See if you can then imagine the firm yet gentle hands of a caring shepherd tending to your needs, even applying balm to your aching wounds.

Psalm 23 assures us that indeed *the Lord* is our shepherd, so we “shall not want”. It proclaims that like a good shepherd, God is always with us and knows each of us by name. God brings us to green pastures and leads us beside still waters.

A woman had been married for forty-three years when her husband suddenly died. She said, “When I stood there at the casket, it felt like my heart had been ripped from my chest. For the longest time, I couldn’t sleep. I’d lie there and hear the clock chime- one, two, three, four o’clock in the morning. It was such a hollow sound, chiming up the stairs of my empty house.

“But then,” she says, “I remembered Psalm 23. At first, I would say it over and over and over, dozens of times. Now, I say it just a few times, but the next thing I know morning has come and I feel better. When I say the words of Psalm 23, I know that God is with me.

Nevertheless- despite its lovely assurances of God’s near presence, Psalm 23 also has parts that can deeply unsettle us. For example, verse 4 says, “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” The rod is a club that the shepherd uses to beat off robbers. The staff is much like a shepherd’s crook that you see in pictures. The shepherd uses the staff for many purposes, and one of them is discipline.

Sometimes a shepherd has to tell the sheep “No” and if the sheep don’t respond to the verbal command, the shepherd will set the staff directly in front of them, like a fence post. If that doesn’t work because a sheep is particularly stubborn, the shepherd will give the animal a strong, hard whack to make it behave. But that is *not* the kind of comfort that I usually want or expect from the Lord who is my shepherd.

Notice, too, that in likening God to a shepherd, Psalm 23 likens us to sheep. What are sheep like? Here are five basic characteristics: 1) As I mentioned before, they don’t see well. Their sight is so poor that they can only see a few feet in front of them. (2) Consequently, they tend to follow each other around, no matter where the nearby others may go. 3) They’re cranky and openly display their sour temperament by frequently biting each other. 4) As I also noted previously, they have delicate stomachs that are prone to indigestion. And, 5) they’re not very smart.

Taken together, these characteristics show why sheep require a lot of attentive care in order to survive. Taken together, they also show that it’s not much of a compliment to be compared to a sheep. In fact, I’d say it’s downright *unflattering*.

Still, the comparison seems apt enough. If we doubt that, let’s think briefly of the kinds of baa, baa, baaing and bite, bite biting that routinely go on among us human beings. They go on in families, among friends, at school, at work, towards strangers, within countries and between nations, within churches and among different religious communities. I’d say that “crankiness” is a mild word for the level of conflict and disharmony that we’ve become accustomed to in the human race. The prophet Isaiah gets to the heart of the matter when in his chapter 53, he says “All we like sheep have gone astray” (verse 6).

We go astray often enough that we *need* a shepherd with an arm strong enough and a staff sturdy enough to tell us “No” when necessary. We need someone bold enough to step in and keep us from doing things that we want to do, but that will hurt us and others if we do them.

I think of my own childhood and young adulthood. The teachers I liked most were usually the ones who let me get away with the most. But those who helped me the most were the ones who knew how and when to tell me “No.” They were the ones who had arms strong enough and a staff sturdy enough to push me onto better paths than the ones I’d follow if left to my own devices.

We *need* shepherds who will help us face up to rather than ignore the lousy consequences and continued dangers of poor choices that we’ve made and are inclined to keep making. Do we ignore such consequences and dangers because we can see only a few feet ahead of us? Do we try to avoid them because we’re preoccupied with smaller matters like an upset stomach? Do we foolishly go off course because, at bottom, we’re just not very smart? Whichever of

these it is or isn't, *true* shepherds lead us onto paths better than the ones we'd take if left to ourselves.

The Bible, especially in prophets like Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Jesus, makes a crucial distinction between true shepherds and false ones. False shepherds tell the people only what they want to hear. Exploit the poor? Sure, go ahead and get whatever you can. Practice injustice? Sure, you have your rights. Worship idols? Why not, if that helps you to feel better.

Israel's poor choices kept taking them onto paths to ruin, but false shepherds kept telling the people, "There's no problem here. You have nothing to worry about. Just keep doing what you're doing." False shepherds never gave them a chance to face up to their problems and to change their ways.

True shepherd, however, like Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Jesus, made the people distinctly *uncomfortable* at first. They called them into the pain of facing up to and repenting of their sins. True shepherds know that beyond the discomfort and challenge of confession and repentance is the promise of new and better life. Their short-term "No" is essential to God's long-term "Yes." (e.g., Ezekiel 34:1-31 & Jer. 23:1-4). Their "No" helps to lead us into "paths of righteousness".

But Psalm 23 also includes something even more basic that can unsettle us even more than the unflattering comparison to sheep.

"The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters." All of which sounds great, of course, but- to put it bluntly- it's not always true. We frequently do want, our pastures are not always green, and sometimes we're hit with torrents of water. Examples of this are easy to multiply.

I think, for instance, of the millions of flood and tsunami victims that our United Church of Christ and other churches seek to help through emergency offerings that we repeatedly take when the need arises. In the desperate situations that those victims face, they know nothing of still waters.

I think too of the countless number of people over the centuries, and especially *children*, who have suffered so miserably from the ravages of war. Look at only a picture or two from the current wars in Ukraine and Sudan and be reminded of how in the midst of war no one lives "in green pastures".

Or think of the innumerable people in every era who have been afflicted by raw injustice. Their situation has come closer to me through friendship over the past 20 years with two remarkable people that I met through the church I formerly served in Haslett. Germain and Jeanine Bindika initially fled their homeland of the Republic of the Congo to avoid being killed by the dictatorial regime that still rules there.

After many trials and with the support of Haslett Community Church, they finally achieved refugee status in the U.S. and lived here for over a decade as a great blessing to many of us. But one night several years ago as Germain walked in the neighborhood near their home in Adrian, he was brutally attacked and beaten by four white men. The attackers stole nothing, but apparently wanted simply to seriously hurt or even kill a black man. The Bindikas have wanted for a very long time. They've wanted for a place where they can live safely and in peace.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Sadly, that's not always true.

And yet . . . at the *deepest* level it is. The later parts of Psalm 23 take us there. At the psalm's beginning, we're tempted to assume that "I shall not want" means that with the Lord at my side my life will be trouble free. But the psalm's later verses show plainly that the psalmist is well aware that this is not true.

The psalmist knows that bleak, hard, discouraging, and even despairing times come to us in this life. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the *shadow of death* . . . You prepare a table before me, O Lord, in the presence of my *enemies*." Psalm 23 knows that "The Lord is my shepherd" emphatically does *not* mean that we're shielded from life's dark sides.

But still . . . in every darkness, hard time, and rough place, the psalmist continues to insist that, "You, O Lord, are with me." It's like the widow said, "When I say the words of Psalm 23, I know that God is with me." Knowing that God is with us, no matter what, brings us the fullest and truest comfort.

Preacher Mike Foss tells of a smiling, gentle, and loving four-year old boy that he knew named Gregory. Gregory was stricken with severe leukemia. As that cancer of his blood roared through his tiny body it often caused him to withdraw in fear and pain. As his end drew near, his mother kept constant vigil by his side. On the last night of his life, she went to the hospital's library for a book to read to him.

She brought back a story about two small boys in a pediatric ward. One boy heard the other one cry out late at night. The next morning, he asked the boy if he had cried out because he was afraid. The boy said yes and the first boy told him, "When you wake up at night and you're afraid, lift up your hand. An angel of God will come and hold it. Then you won't be afraid anymore."

The storybook continued. In the middle of the next night the boy woke up again, and again, he was about to cry out in fear. But he remembered what his friend had told him. He lifted his hand into the dark, and an angel came and held it. Soon thereafter, he died.

Gregory's mother finished reading this story to her son but couldn't keep her composure. She rushed from the room to wipe away her tears and to steady her nerves. She returned to her son's side where his death was obviously near.

A hospice friend, two nurses and the attending physician gathered around the bed when unexpectedly and for the first time in many hours, Gregory opened his eyes. He looked at his mother and he smiled. He raised his hand into the air, smiled again, and then closed his eyes. Soon thereafter, he died.

In the shadow of his death, Gregory came to know that "The Lord is my shepherd". So can we in our darkest hours. Our enemies can take many different forms, but God prepares a table for us in their presence. Even in the valley of our death's shadow, we fear no evil because God is with us. Into every darkness we raise our hands for the Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want. Amen.