

The Sheep Know the Shepherd's Voice

Psalm 23; John 10:1-10
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

So much of our faith is contained in that dear sentence. It does not contain everything, but it contains a great deal of biblical faith. It is somewhat common to observe that, when you ask people of faith what their favorite Bible passage is, Psalm 23 is almost always at or very near the top. Early in my ministry, I remember being somewhat puzzled about this, even as I knew it was true. I was talking to a mentor of mine about this, and I said, "I don't get it. So many people say that the 23rd Psalm is their favorite Bible passage, but it talks about death, and evil, and enemies. It's fairly clear that life involves these very negative things. Why would people love a psalm that talks so much about these kinds of things?" And my mentor smiled and said, "Scott, I think that's exactly why people treasure Psalm 23. Because it's a very real psalm. It doesn't gloss over the hard things in life, even as it bestows courage and nerve and hope in the midst of those things."

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want - which is to say, the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need. In our world of craving and thirsting for more and more, the 23rd psalm speaks of a life of having enough. According to Psalm 23, we can step out of the rat race, because the rat race cannot give us what it promises us. The rat race promises us that if we work more, if we accumulate more, if we gain more popularity, if we get more votes, if we acquire more possessions, then we will be happy.

But that is not true. Happiness does not come from accumulation. True happiness, true security does not come from external things. Happiness is an "inside job." If we do not realize that, because the Lord is our shepherd, we already have everything we need, then we will keep looking for it somewhere else.

The metaphor for God as our shepherd comes from deep in Jewish memory, from the way that King David, who occupies such a great place in the imagination of the Bible, grew up as a boy shepherd, and grew to become king. The tools of the trade for a shepherd – the rod and the staff – are the tools of care, where a shepherd would use the staff with its hooked end to scoop up a sheep that had fallen into a ditch, and the tools of protection, where the shepherd would use the rod to beat off wolves or others who would attack. Within this metaphor, we are the sheep of God's pasture, who

look to God both for attentive care and for protective guidance as we make our way through life.

Last week, we read in Matthew 7, where Jesus calls his followers away from the wide gate that leads to trouble and violence and death, and invites them to the narrow gate that leads to life. This week, John 10 – which comes from a different community of disciples, the John community, or Johannine community, was different from the Matthew, or the Matthean, community – but this week, John 10 portrays Jesus talking about himself *as* the gate that leads to the pasture, and as the one who brings abundant life. So in Matthew, Jesus invites us to the narrow gate that leads to life, and in John, Jesus announces that he is himself the gate that leads to life. They are speaking of the same thing, Jesus is the way to life, by coming to Jesus, we come to life.

What we are meant to see here is that coming to Jesus will reliably lead you into the heart of God. We are on a journey into the heart of God, and when we are unsure of how to do that, when we fret about how can I ever find God, what if God doesn't accept me, what if I can't calm myself down enough to listen for God's quiet voice inside, what if there's too much conflict and strife in my life, what if I've got too many addictions, what if I never can hear God's voice, what if other people think I've messed up too much, what if other people think I'm a loser or a failure, what if I can't stop judging other people and all the ways they're messing up, what if my life is falling apart and I can't imagine finding the heart of God... When we're feeling any of those things, Jesus says, "Come to me. I am the gate. I am the way to the Father. When you come to me, you are coming to the heart of God. You can trust me, you can leave it all behind, and come to me. You do not have to have it all figured out. You do not have to get your life together first. You do not have to pass an entrance exam, you do not have to beat other people out to get in. Come to me. I am the gate, and I am the shepherd. You are my sheep, you belong to me.

And what we find is that the voice of Christ is a voice that we actually already know, down deep in our souls, because by the grace of God, our truest selves are already hidden with Christ in God. Christ is already living in us, so when we hear his voice in Scripture, it resonates deeply within us. When the apostle Paul says in Galatians 2, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me," he is not saying, "If you're very good, then Christ will live in you," he is saying, "Christ lives in you already." When Jesus says in John 15, "Abide in me as I abide in you," Jesus is not saying, "If you abide in me, then I might choose, if you're really lucky, to come and abide in you." Jesus is saying, "I'm already abiding within you. So why don't you come and abide with me, too?" These teachings are showing us that our truest selves, our selves that are made in the image of God, resonate with the same vibration as Christ.

We are already in God, we were made in the image of God, Christ abides with us, Christ lives in us, the Holy Spirit is indwelling us as we speak. When Paul in Acts 17

says that “in him we live and move and have our being,” he is saying that we are already embedded in God. We can’t not be in God. The triune God is the matrix within which we move.

This is why we know the voice of the good shepherd in John 10, because his voice resonates deep within us. His voice is like the voice of a mother that the child can pick out of any crowd. The child knows the mother’s voice because the child has been hearing it forever, and the child trusts that voice.

Now both Psalm 23 and John 10 are clear that all of this beautiful news about trusting the voice of God takes place in *contested space*. Psalm 23 and John 10 speak of evil, fear, enemies, thieves, bandits, ones who come to steal and kill and destroy. There are forces in the world that do not have our best interests at heart. Psalm 23 and John 10 are not talking about some Pollyanna spirituality that is disconnected from the painful realities of the world. Biblical faith is always lived in the midst of the world’s problems and troubles and conflicts. But biblical faith lives in the midst of the world’s problems and troubles and conflicts with a peculiar peacefulness, because the Lord is our shepherd, so we can expect to be given what we need to face the situations of our lives. We are aware of the forces of negativity – in the world, and inside of our own hearts, but we are more aware of the presence of Christ who shepherds us and holds us and guides us through them all.

So, the voice of Christ our Shepherd is a voice that we already know, it already resonates with us. But it is also the case that we need to learn to recognize it. We need to engage in regular practices to become familiar with the voice of Christ our Shepherd. We are inundated with seductive voices of the world – the voice of temptations and addictions telling us that we can’t live without this particular thing, the voice of the consumer marketplace telling us that the way to be happy is to buy more of this or more of that, the voice of the crowd telling us that the way to be accepted is to go along with what others think and expect, the voice of our fears that tell us that the way to be safe is to control situations in such a way that things work out in a particular way – those voices are so much with us, that we need to spend time disengaging from them so that we can engage our hearts in listening for the voice of Christ. In my experience, spending time in silence is indispensable for this. It has been said that the voice of God is the sound of silence, and that the word of God emerges from the great silence. This week, in the midst of everything that I know you have going on, I urge you to create a time of silence each day. Create a small amount of time each day for silence, perhaps 5 minutes to begin with, create a small amount of time each day to sit or to walk slowly in silence, and begin that time by saying, “Christ, my shepherd, I want to get to know the feel of your voice.” Christ, who loves you, is sending his love to you and through you.

The voice of your good shepherd is with you and within you already. As we come to know that voice more deeply, as we come to recognize it and follow it, we will feel

more grounded in our daily activities. In the midst of our daily activities, it will be, as the psalmist says, as though we are being led beside still waters, having our souls restored, being led in good and right paths, for his name's sake.

To God and to God alone be all the glory, Amen.