

Easter 4C – May 8, 2022

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

In the Presence of The Shepherd

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA.

In the gospel according to John, we find the great “I am” statements. There are seven of these I am statements in the fourth gospel, statements that Jesus uses to help his disciples understand who he is. Can you name some of the “I am” statements?

“I am the bread of life.” (John 6:35, 41, 48, 51)

“I am the light of the world.” (John 8: 12; 9:5)

“I am the door.” (John 10: 7, 9)

“I am the resurrection and the life.” (John 11:25)

“I am the way and the truth and the life.” (John 4:16)

“I am the true vine.” (John 15:1, 5)

“I am the good shepherd.” (John 10:11,14)



As a teacher, Jesus uses a variety of images to help us understand who he is. More than simply saying that Jesus is our savior, with a focus on viewing Jesus as the ticket to heaven... considering Jesus as the bread of life offers us an earthy image that asks us to consider what it means to be fed, nourished, and cared for. The image of a door invites us to explore what the invitation to go through that door means for our lives... a door that offers a threshold between our current position, and the promise that awaits on the other side of the doorway. The invitation is to overcome the inertia of staying fixed and comfortable. The invitation is to move towards a new way of being that we cannot know on this side of the threshold. The image of a vine evokes, for me, the actual feeling of being connected to THE SOURCE. The images prompts me to feel life-giving sustenance coursing through my veins. When I think of Jesus as the light of the world, I see the light of love illuminating the painful corners of human existence where God seeks to comfort, heal, and reconcile. The one who is “the way the truth and the life”... is the one who invites us to follow him into the realm of ever-fuller knowledge of God’s abundant love.

Every year, on the fourth Sunday after Easter, we consider what it means to be loved and cared for by God... as God is known in the image of the Good Shepherd. Though we don’t have an “I am” statement in today’s gospel lesson, Jesus speaks of the power of belonging to him, using the imagery of sheep: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” In the ancient world, the concept of the relationship between sheep and their shepherds would have been readily understood.

On Good Shepherd Sunday we also focus on the beloved 23rd Psalm that is a comfort in all times, and a comfort, especially, when fear is knocking at the door and life feels overwhelming. I know that it only takes the opening words of the psalm to feel God’s calming presence.

What comes to your mind when you hear the words *“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want?”* What do you see with your mind’s eye? What catches your attention? For me, just those opening words of the 23rd, transport me to the shepherd’s realm... to a place of great peace where sunny green pastures are adorned with baaing sheep... where specks of sunlight sparkle atop clear still waters. Those mere five words, “The Lord is my shepherd,” evoke the sensation of God’s calm, deep peace.

In verse 4, we are swept away from bucolic serenity to be reminded of the reality of death. For Israelites, the “Valley of Death” might evoke the local landscape where steep, sheer walls frame plunging valleys... places where shadows descend well before the sun goes down on the rest of the land. The spiritual geography of this place is severe... possibly evoking fearsome childhood images of bogeymen who hide under our beds at night. It is a valley that is overflowing with lurking fears that come in the shape of death... the death of our bodies... death in the form of deep losses... death that calls out from the shadows... including the death of hope. The psalm reminds us, however, that even in this frightening and lonely place, God is with us to strengthen and guide us.

“Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” Shepherds use their staffs to keep sheep from wandering off. They use the crook of their staffs to grab a neck or to trip a leg. The straight end of the staff is used to poke and fend off predators. A good shepherd both protects and agitates the flock in order to move the sheep in the direction they need to go. The shepherd watches over the whole flock. The shepherd guides and protects.

The last verse begins with the line, *“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life...”* A closer look at the translation of the Hebrew word for “follow” suggest that the shepherd does more than simply follow the sheep. A better translation of the word is “pursue” or “chase”... God’s justice and mercy will surely “hound” us... relentlessly... through thick and thin... all the days of our lives... even in the midst of fear and death. Our God hounds us onto paths of justice and salvation... into heaven’s realm of peace on earth. The same God who freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt... with Pharaoh’s army in hot pursuit... is the same God who continues to hound us onto right paths and fullness of life... even in the midst of life’s most desperate situations. The 23rd psalm comforted my grandmother Fannie as she lay dying from pancreatic cancer, and my friend Donna after her husband Bill’s death. The 23rd Psalm has the power to draw us into God’s generous, calming presence where we can lay down the nagging “wants” that seek to claim our attention... “wants” such as:

I want a happier life
 I want to feel that others care about me
 I want to feel heard and understood
 I want better health
 I want my loneliness to end
 I want that pesky “To Do” list completed
 I want my stress to disappear
 I want my financial woes resolved
 I want to go on that trip I cannot afford
 I want to die peacefully in my bed...
 I want to feel like I belong
 ...and that my life has meaning
 ...and maybe, too, I want that new car...

... you fill in the blank_____

We live in a culture that focuses on “want” ... on what we don’t have... on scarcity. When we pray the 23rd Psalm, we are engaging with God in a countercultural activity. When we lay down our “wants” ... our load is lightened and we are drawn into God’s peaceful presence... a promise that is not simply about our heavenly reward. The promise is for us here, in this place, right now.

Let us encounter the 23rd Psalm once again. I would like to invite you to join in a guided meditation. Please enter this meditation in the way that feels most comfortable to you. You may close your eyes or keep them open. If your mind wanders off... that is OK. God is with us even when we wander. You may want to let images come to mind... and invite your senses of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste help enrich your meditation experience. If you prefer not to enter the meditation, that is OK, too.

Now I invite you to close your eyes and take a slow deep breath... in through your nose and out through your mouth... and simply pay attention to the psalm’s invitation:

“The Lord is my shepherd” ... Feel the presence of the one who is looking after you and protecting you. Feel the presence of the one who is guiding you to places of healing and wholeness that you didn’t even know existed. Feel God’s life-giving presence.

“I shall not be in want.” I invite you to let your nagging “wants” show themselves... then release them... let God lighten your load...

“God makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters.” Feel this place... let the details come into focus... What do you see.... what do you hear... what do you smell? Feel the green grass and firm ground beneath you. Gaze upon the still water. Know that you can return to this place as often as you like.

“God revives my soul.” Feel God’s life stirring inside. Where in your body are you experiencing sensations? Pay attention. Allow yourself to be stirred awake.

“God guides me along right pathways because God calls us to life.” With your mind’s eye see the path of well-being that is before you. Feel God’s presence with you.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me.” Peer into the shadows... and feel God’s steady strength and presence with you.

“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Symbols of strength and protection are powerful. The symbol may be a shepherd’s crook. It may be a cross. The symbol may be a strong hand ready to catch you before you fall. Feel God’s strength and comfort.

“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me.” Can you see the faces of those who cause trouble and grief in your life? Before us is the table of welcome and reconciliation. Take your seat at the table with the others. The feast has been made ready.

“You have anointed my head with oil.” Feel the warm touch that marks you as worthy. Feel the anointing that turns commoners into royalty. You are deserving.

“My cup overflows.” There is more than enough... more than enough. Feel the abundance.

“God... your goodness, love and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life.” We need not hide. We can rest in you. We will dwell in your presence now and forever.

I would like to end with a version of the 23rd Psalm from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word, you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.
Even when the way goes through Death Valley,
I'm not afraid when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure
You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.
Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.

Amen...