

In Green Pastures and Beside Still Waters

Psalm 23; John 10: 1 – 10

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Prayer: O Great Shepherd, whose presence was discerned in the history of our spiritual forebears, we come to you, with the prayer that you would restore our souls with your word of truth. Lead us in paths of righteousness, that we may show your love to the world...

What are you taking care of at home? What are you doing to cultivate living things? With social calendars cancelled, and physical distancing from one another firmly in place, many of us have been out in our yards caring for our plantings -- or just out in nature, appreciating the season. This last week in my neighborhood many lawns were mowed for the first time. On zoom gatherings household pets are asserting themselves as members of the family.

The work of shepherding is a major metaphor in scripture – Old and New Testament. From the beginning of Genesis in chapter 4, we have an origin story of the deep rivalry between the shepherd Abel and the farmer Cain. The Israelites distinguished themselves from the Canaanites – Israel kept herds and traveled with them, Canaanites were farmers and stayed on their land. Israel worshipped YHWH, a God who moved with them in a tabernacle that was carried along, Canaanites worshipped a fertility god, Baal who stayed in their land.

In John's gospel, Jesus is exploring the meaning of what it is to be an authentic shepherd. And it would have been clear to those first listening. Here he compares himself to the gate itself. Opening up to the eternal, joyful, meaningful life that is to be lived in this green pasture, beside these still waters, even though we walk through a valley with the shadow of death hanging over us, our shepherd has opened the gate for us to walk here without fear.

Jesus was speaking to shepherds in John's gospel (everyone was a part time shepherd in his culture.) The logic of his parable is that if you follow the true shepherd, the gate will let the sheep out into green pastures, beside still waters. If you follow the thieves and bandits, that gate opens up to ...destruction. From the perspective of the sheep, they can't always tell one gate from another gate. The best they've got to go on is the sound of their shepherd's voice.

This has nothing to do with intelligence, let me tell you, smart people can do stupid things, and can even ingeniously find more ways to do the wrong things in more and more complicated ways. Michael Milken and Bernie Madoff committed such complicated crimes. So imaginative...and so much math. They did not find green pastures, they went to prison and they fell into despair. Their families destroyed by their actions.

In this passage there are thieves and bandits. The shepherd enters by the gate, but the thieves go in and out any way they can. The gatekeeper opens the gate for the real shepherd, and the true shepherd can lead his sheep just by his voice – because they know it.

Almost everyone didn't live too far away from a flock of sheep, more likely more than one, or had taken a turn themselves watching over them – guiding them away from wolves; staying up late with them in lambing season (as was going on at the time of Jesus' birth); finding a quiet place for them to get a drink, as you want to keep your sheep away from whitewater (they can't swim well with those heavy coats) and you can't have them drinking out of puddles either. It requires attention, but it isn't an especially hard job. Mostly you use your common sense. In David's family, they sent the youngest brother out to watch the sheep. You have to look after the sheep and do what needs doing...if anything...

So most everybody had had a turn at it. It would be natural to talk about it, like we can talk about the weather, or the differences between a good driver and a bad driver on the road “the good driver will not put themselves and others in harm's way” etc...a common language.

Some time ago I received a flattering email saying that because of my impressive skills visible on my previous church's website, this organization wanted to fly me to London to speak at their fabulous conference. Naturally, I was inclined to believe this was true...but as I thought about it I noticed that I had less than 48 hours to respond to their offer, and I did not know the person contacting me, or anyone else speaking at the conference, and as I thought this through, if they were going to buy me airfare out of the country, they would probably need to get my passport number and other personal information...

And I realized... I wasn't hearing the voice of my shepherd anymore. Straying outside my flock, where it is dangerous to go alone.

What are you taking care of? What are you doing to cultivate living things? Jesus names us shepherds of the flock. This season is fraught with danger from pandemic, to misinformation, to anxiety and panic, grief and despair. If you are not lonely and bored, you may be overwhelmed, under-resourced, or sick yourself.

In all of this, listen for the voice of the good shepherd, enter by that gate, and shepherd someone else who is struggling. There's green pastures, and still waters, and while we may be walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we do not need to be afraid.

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