

It's one of the best-known and most beloved passages of scripture. Along with John 3:16, it's one of the only parts of the bible many people ever learn by heart. In fact, it is so nearly universally comforting, it is by far the most requested chapter of the Old Testament requested to be read in hospitals, at funerals and memorial services, by gravesides.

The 23rd Psalm: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

It's poetry is familiar—familiar even to those not raised in the church, with phrases like “my cup runneth over” entering into our more general culture, used even by people who have no idea it comes from the bible. This familiar psalm has inspired works of art—paintings, drawings, sculptures even other poems because of its simple though vivid imagery. Though talking about our Lord God, the words of this poem, this song, this psalm describe so concisely what a shepherd is, what a shepherd does. Coupled with other passages, like the extended section of John 10 that we read from this morning, we Christians see in its imagery a vision of Jesus—who refers to himself as The Good Shepherd. And when we put these different

The Good Shepherd Leads. He leads us beside still waters, and in the paths of righteousness. The Good Shepherd Guides. He guides us through dark valleys—even through the valley of the shadow death—allowing us to emerge on the other side. He guides us not just now, but forever. The Good Shepherd Provides. Green pastures. Abundant food and adequate rest. A place to call home. The Good Shepherd Protects. From rocky pathways and treacherous canyons. From threatening wolves and ever-present enemies. The Good Shepherd Knows his own, and his own know him. He has other sheep that he must bring in also, always looking to expand that flock, always looking for the rest of those that belong to him and just don't know it yet—or those who are his and are just waiting to find their way back to the flock, to rediscover their identity as his sheep. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Yes, there is power in the words of the 23rd Psalm, in the portrait of the Good Shepherd painted there and in John's Gospel. Still, I wonder, why exactly is it such a comfort? Especially for us, who don't actually have experience of shepherds and sheep, why do we find these words so comforting? Sure, it is the kind of poetry that speaks across generations, across cultures, across classes. Sure, there is a level of familiarity there for many of us—those of us, for example, who can't remember *not*

knowing the 23rd Psalm. But the words themselves, the image in and of itself, why do we find that particularly comforting? I mean, few if any of us have first hand experience of being a shepherd, of actually tending sheep in any way except metaphorically. My hunch, though, is that this image speaks so deeply to us not because we have first-hand experience of actual shepherds, but rather because we all have a deep-seated longing for exactly the kind of care someone portrayed as a Good Shepherd might provide.

We want, we need, we desperately crave someone to lead, simply because often we are stuck. We find ourselves at various times in our life not knowing what to do next. We need someone to follow, someone we can trust, someone we can believe in.

We want, we need, we desperately crave someone who will guide us in life, because so often we find that we are simply wandering, that our lives rudderless, in disarray, our very being a mere existence flapping in the breeze.

I suspect that we are drawn so completely to someone who will provide for us for the plain and simple reason that we have many, very real needs. We all have physical needs like shelter, food, meaningful work, education. We have psychological needs like friendship, affection, love, trust, safety. We have Spiritual needs like forgiveness, acceptance, vocation, salvation. Some of us—and if we're honest with ourselves All of us at one time or another find ourselves overwhelmed by our needs, looking for someone who will provide for us.

Of course, we want someone who will protect us because at times we are scared. We are vulnerable. There are things in our lives that are dangerous, that can and have caused us harm. We long to be comforted by loving arms that draw us to safety.

And all of us—to varying degrees at various times, we want to know and be known by someone—to belong to someone, to be part of something bigger than our selves. We want someone who knows us like a shepherd knows his own sheep.

And yes, we need someone who is willing to lay down their life for us—to give our lives meaning, to save us from ourselves, to take our pain as their own, to deliver us from whatever evil surrounds us.

I suspect that this image of shepherd is, in fact very comforting for us—21st Century Urban and Suburban citizens, even for us who have never spent much time around sheep, who have maybe never even seen a shepherd, good bad or otherwise, for those of us who have certainly never been a shepherd.

Earlier this week, in our online devotion, I shared an image of a good shepherd from Jill Ker Conway's book *The Road from Coorain*. Actually the image I shared was from

a sheep shearer who often visited her parents massive sheep station in the Australian Outback. But another image from that same book also speaks to me about how Jesus, our good shepherd goes about his work of shepherding us. Conway writes about having to move these enormous flocks of sheep from one grazing area to another and how two of them would do so by separating, one going clockwise, the other counterclockwise, driving the flock into the middle, so that they would become one massive flock and could be moved from one 12,000-acre paddock to another. Rather than *leading* the sheep, out in front, pied piper style, they would have to lead them from behind—constantly nudging, prodding, cajoling, back in forth in seemingly the wrong direction to get them to eventually move to where they needed to go. For most of the sheep in these enormous flocks, they would have absolutely no vision, no image, no first-hand experience of the alleged shepherd who was actually getting them to move. What they had was the sensation of being led by those around them—a sort of indirect leading or guiding not from the shepherd per se, but rather from the other sheep around them.

Sometimes, we follow directly after our Good Shepherd, like the sheep in the 23rd Psalm who are gently and quietly led to green pastures and still waters, who are provided abundant meals and overflowing cups. We hear the voice of the Good Shepherd described in John 10, the Good Shepherd who calls us, who knows us, whose voice we know and trust, and we willingly go where he gently bids us to go. But here's the thing: at other times—and I would suggest *most* of the time, we are less like those biblical sheep in the Psalms and Gospels. Rather, we are more like those sheep in Coorain in the Australian outback. We feel like maybe we are being led somewhere or another, but we never actually see the One who is leading us. We might sense that we are being guided to green pastures and still waters, but we never really see the One who is doing the guiding. It all seems to indirect—like the massive flocks in the Outback being shifted by two shepherd pushing and prodding from behind.

No, we may not always realize it, but we *have* seen shepherds, we *have* experienced shepherds. Truth we told, sisters and brothers, we *are* shepherds. We are shepherds to one another. Not simply as Paul writes in Ephesians, that among the different and varied gifts we have received there are some who are called to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. Yes, those of us called to inhabit the office of pastor, we are literally shepherds—that's what that word, Pastor, means after all. But that's not exactly what I'm talking about.

Following the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, one who lays down his life for the sheep, the one who cares for the sheep, the one who knows his own who also recognize his voice; the one who has told us that he has other sheep that do are not of this fold, but must be brought in as well. Following this Good Shepherd, we are all called to be shepherds to one another. Gathered together as the body of Christ—and even when we're not gathered here, but out there in the world, living as followers of Jesus, the good shepherd, we are called to be shepherds to one another. To those among us

who are wandering, questioning, seeking, discerning, we are called to offer guidance, direction, a listening ear or even just gracious space to live amid and within those questions. To those around us who are feeling stuck in a rut, purposeless, rudderless, drifting, ungrounded, we are called to offer a word of hope, a word of acceptance, or maybe even just a wordless hug. To those of us—in here or out there—who have real unmet needs—physical, emotional, spiritual or whatever—we are called to help meet those needs.

Following the Good Shepherd, we can be shepherds to one another, leading and guiding as we have found guidance, providing for out of our abundance, protecting as we have found well-being, knowing others as we have truly been known, loving others as we have truly been loved, laying aside the self-centeredness of our own lives in order to begin truly living for others. This is the call of the Good Shepherd, whose voice we know, whose leading we trust.

Thanks be to God. Amen.