

10/19/2014 -- "Leading Sheep" - © Rev. Seth D. Jones
Scripture: Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

At the beginning of the summer, one of the topics for consideration was Psalm 23. This week, we will look deeply into Psalm 23 and then next week we will expand on it when we discuss the big stained glass window at the back of the church.

While I was at seminary, professors who were retiring put their books out on tables outside their offices. They were free and students could just rifle through them and take what they wanted. I acquired several books that way. One of them was this one, Philip Keller's "**A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23**". I just read it for the first time this past week and it was quite an insight into the Psalm.

Only a true shepherd would be able to write Psalm 23. The whole Psalm is written from the perspective of a sheep. It is not known when David wrote this, but if you remember, David's work from the very beginning was tending the sheep of his father, Jesse. When Samuel is sent by God to anoint the next King of Israel, all of Jesse's sons are brought before Samuel.

11 Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." 12 He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. (1 Sam 16:11-13)

Not just any shepherd could write Psalm 23 either. There are good shepherds and then there are uncaring, bad shepherds. Bad shepherds would never take the time to find out what it is like to be a sheep. To find out means the shepherd would have to care, and caring leads to loving the flock. It is only out of love of his flock that someone could write Psalm 23. Only a good shepherd could write this.

With Mr. Keller's help, I want to go through this Psalm line by line this morning and explore what it means to be a sheep with a Good Shepherd. And yes, I am suggesting that all of us here today are, in fact, just like sheep.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

From the very beginning, it is important to recognize that claiming the Lord as our shepherd is only in recognition of the claim God has already made upon us, not a choice we have made. Sheep don't choose their shepherd. A shepherd chooses his own sheep. He walks through the fields of another's farm, through the market or fair, and the shepherd chooses the sheep he wishes to be in the flock. So when we say, "*The Lord is my shepherd*", we are simply acknowledging the claim the Lord has already made upon us. He has "*earmarked*" us in our baptism. An earmark is how shepherds tell their flock from neighboring flocks. It is a mark carved into the sheep's ear with a razor sharp knife. It can hurt to be chosen and claimed.

Being claimed, we also trust. *"I shall not want"* is not only a statement of the future; it is also a reflection of the present. The difference between a Good Shepherd and a bad shepherd is provision and preparation. I was stunned to find out how much preparation is required to care for sheep. More than any other livestock, the care and tending required for sheep is exceptional. They require attention and deep, loving care to thrive. *"I shall not want"* means our desires reflect God's desires for us.

What do you think God desires from you? Do you berate yourself for all you have not done for God, all your failures, all the things you have done wrong? Let me suggest, at least from the perspective of a sheep (remember, for today we are all sheep), *not wanting* is an expression of thriving and flourishing. A Good Shepherd wants the flock to flourish and thrive. A Good Shepherd is fulfilled by seeing the flock healthy, strong and contented. And God has provided the ways for us to do that. We shall not want because God does not want us to want. Wanting leads to discontent. Discontent leads to other fields. Those other fields will not provide in the way the Lord provides.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

I mentioned the preparation involved in tending sheep. Raising and caring for sheep is not just a matter of providing a pen for them and letting them in and out during the day. You can do that with cows and horses. For sheep, those green pastures are created by the shepherd for the sheep. They are tended year after year by the Good Shepherd so that they are full and green and lush, for the sheep. Still waters are tended waters. Most of the waters in the Middle East, where David lived, were flowing streams and rivers. Sheep are not bright, or rather, they are stubborn and stiff-necked creatures - kind of like us. They will make ridiculous decisions to get to water, and will roll down hills into the streams and rivers and get washed away or drown. I hope the analogy to human behavior is not lost on you here. So shepherds, good shepherds, will create pools for them to get water. The Good Shepherd will dig out an eddy for the sheep to gather around to drink from still, safe waters.

Green pastures and still waters are prepared and tended areas, by the Good Shepherd, for the flourishing and health of the flock. This can't be stressed enough. When you walk out the doors of this church, imagine, just for today, that you are walking out into a field that *your* Good Shepherd has prepared for you, has tended for your sake.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Sheep are sensitive creatures. They are subject to the elements, to certain diseases, and to outside dangers. Along with all the preparation required by the Good Shepherd to provide for the flock, there is also the continual, unending presence of the shepherd. One of the things sheep are sensitive to are challenges to their authority. Particularly old, mature sheep. They will control the best patches of grass by head-butting younger sheep. Sometimes, after a while, this makes the younger sheep unmotivated, down-cast in spirit, weak. This then makes them vulnerable to disease because they do not feel included in the flock, and vulnerable to predators because they will hang back when the flock is on the move or will graze at the edges of the field. But when the Good Shepherd is present, all this controlling behavior by the mature sheep

will stop. If the Shepherd in the past has taken the time to discipline the stubborn recalcitrant sheep, the controlling behavior will stop as soon as the Shepherd appears.

It is really all about trust. The paths which sheep walk must be varied and many, otherwise the path becomes a rut. The rut becomes a deeper chasm in the ground, and then the ground erodes away, making unsafe passages from the lower fields of the winter to the higher fields of the summer. And so the Good Shepherd *leads* the sheep along paths. Sometimes, the shepherd will hold his staff to touch a sheep for a while so it knows the shepherd is with her or him.

The Lord has given us paths to walk along to bring us into God's righteousness, for his sake and glory. We are led along these paths. Do we trust our Shepherd to lead us along them?

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

I learned in Mr. Keller's book that to be "*cast down*" is a phrase that comes from the tending of sheep. A "cast" sheep is a sheep that has managed to get itself onto its back and is unable to right itself. This is where the phrase "to be cast down" comes from. For a sheep, it is a very dangerous situation to be 'cast down'. They can suffocate, and obviously are easy prey for a predator. A 'cast down' sheep is one which is either sick, too heavy with wool or too fat. The reason a sheep becomes 'cast' is even more interesting. Hear this well: A sheep becomes 'cast' by trying to get comfortable. They will nestle into a little depression in the ground and roll around to find the perfect place, then will end up rolling onto their back, all for the most comfortable position. A Good Shepherd will quickly right a 'cast' sheep and get them moving again.

As sheep are led from field to field, the summer fields are usually higher in the mountains. To get to them, the shepherd and the sheep must traverse the valleys to get there. Valleys are where waters flow, plants are lush and the shade is cool. Valleys are also where storms can catch you unaware. When I was backpacking through the Beartooth Mountains, we had the opportunity to get caught in a storm while in a mountain valley. We felt relatively protected until we noticed the stream rising quickly, then we had to hurry to higher ground. The rocks were slippery, it was cold, and it was hard to see with all the rain falling. It was a dangerous, scary situation.

The valleys of suffering can be long. The promise of higher ground can be just a faint memory. Sometimes, whether in a valley or on higher ground, the dangers do not go away. The mountain lion attacks and kills the lamb; the sleet comes and freezes the elders of the flock; diseases can break out anywhere.

But the key phrase from this verse is this: *for thou art with me*. All the preparation of the Good Shepherd for our flourishing does not mean bad things will never happen. The Good Shepherd prepares the fields and the trails with the expectation of flourishing and thriving for you and I. Preparation also means that when (not if...when) bad things happen, the Shepherd can be *with us* in the midst of those bad things. The Shepherd suffers with the sheep. Jesus says in John 10,

“14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

When we lived in Montana, we used to drive over Chief Joseph Pass to get to Cody, WY. From the top of Chief Joseph, we could see the top of Table Mountain. It was a huge flat space that had steep cliffs on all sides. In the summer, it was green and beautiful and lush.

In the Southwest, there are *mesas*, which are flat mountains. *Mesa* is the Spanish word for “table”. There are many *mesas* in the Middle East. They are often the summer residence for large flocks of sheep. But before the sheep go up to the mesa, the table, for the summer, the Good Shepherd must go up first and prepare the table for the flock. This means clearing out all the poisonous plants, making sure the ‘still water’ areas are cleared of brush and leaves, and the paths are cleared of debris and blockages.

Up on the table, the flies and parasites are extreme in the summer months. The Good Shepherd will protect the flock by putting a mixture of linseed or olive oil, sulfur and tar on the heads of the sheep. Can you imagine the attention required to anoint the heads of 350 sheep with oil to protect them from black flies and nose flies and parasites? How gentle the application of those oils must be so it doesn’t get into the eyes of the sheep? Keller says once the sheep were free of the flies they would skip.

Psa 114:1-4 When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; (2) Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion. (3) The sea saw it, and fled: Jordan was driven back. (4) The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs.

It is this attention and care and love that makes our cup run over. God is always providing with abundance and far more than we need. Again Jesus says, in the verse just before our reading today, *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

So many of us are like the stubborn, stiff-necked sheep in the flock. We head-butt people out of our territory. We think we know the better path to get to the field or the water. We want the comfort we see in the other sheep across the field. But in our pride, we injure others, we fall into the rushing stream, we don’t realize the care and attention we are receiving is real love, and the sheep across the way are actually starving and suffering underneath all that wool.

From start to finish, the Good Shepherd has prepared everything for us, his sheep. He has chosen us and earmarked us to his flock. He has prepared the green pastures and the still waters. The paths are maintained by him and he leads us to and along them. The lowlands and the highlands are prepared and tended for our sake, so that we might flourish and thrive.

And still, we want something else. Why?

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Well-tended sheep tend well to the sheep in the flock. Well-tended lands leave well tended pastures for the flock that comes after. Well-tended sheep leave a trail of goodness and mercy. Mr. Keller describes his neighbor several times. His neighbor was a man who became for Keller an example of someone who had rejected God's abundance and care. This man's sheep reflected that rejection. They were scrawny and unhealthy. Their fields were brown and lacking. Sometimes, the neighbor's sheep would find a break in the fence and come over to Keller's thriving flock and fields. But Keller would have to return the sheep, because, as he says, quoting Jesus, they didn't come in through the correct gate. It was deeply painful to him to return those sheep, often to their own death.

Look back over your life, or if that is too much, this past week. Does goodness and mercy follow you? If we have accepted that Lord is truly our shepherd, then the abundance of the Good Shepherd will be overflowing from our cups for the sake of others, we will see green pastures and still waters behind us and before us.

We will then dwell in the abundant and luxurious fields of the Lord forever, knowing that the Good Shepherd will always be with us, his rod and his staff comforting and protecting us at every moment.

Amen.