

FAIRMOUNT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, MAY 2, 2004
TITLE: "IS THE LORD MY SHEPHERD?"
TEXTS: Psalm 23, John 10: 22-30

I wonder sometimes what images of shepherd and sheep mean in our upscale contemporary culture. Many have never seen a living large flock of sheep and even fewer have seen a genuine shepherd. In fact, not many of us in 2004 look favorably on being characterized as sheep – there are so many negative connotations like “dumb,” “following the crowd without question,” “having no mind of one’s own,” or “expecting someone else to take care of us.”

Yet, our Scripture texts today are full of such images. Psalm 23 is certainly the best-known passage of Scripture and we all could probably recite it. It is regularly used at funerals as a comfort for those who mourn. It reveals that God is present for us in any and every circumstance – in the peaceful moments and in times of danger and fear. “God with us” makes our life experience less frightening and more meaningful.

Our Gospel text also enlightens our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. (Read John 10: 22-30) In this encounter in the Temple at the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah), Jesus responds to the question about his claim to be the messiah, an identity with God, by calling attention to his ministry and the interrogators refusal to believe by declaring, “You do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me.” He concludes by saying, “the Father and I are one,” thus identifying himself with God’s work in all of life. It is in the incarnation that the total revelation of God’s love for us and presence with us is made clear. We are no longer aliens and strangers but in faith are restored to a relationship that affects all aspects of our life individually and as a community of faith. The shepherd images of Christ in John’s Gospel expand our understanding of the psalmist’s words. It also prompts a question for each of us – “Is the Lord my shepherd?”

The metaphors used in this Psalm utilize the shepherd/sheep imagery to characterize the features of faith that transform our life journeys as Christ’s followers. A major feature of such faith is a trust that carries us through our toughest times of perceived danger or fear. It is a radical trust that empowers us to believe that our life has meaning even though our immediate experience may be telling us otherwise. Besides the rest, restoration, and direction God provides, divine presence is crucial when we walk through dark and terror-filled places or when enemies appear to be in position to overwhelm us. Preparing a table for me in the presence of my enemies refers to the Old Testament concept of “sanctuary” that still exists in the Middle East today. When one takes refuge with the head of the tribe, no enemy is allowed to lay a hand on that person. To recognize God’s presence and provision is not blind obedience but rather unflinching trust. “It is not a question that bad things will never happen to us. It is that we will not have to face those bad things alone, for you are with me.” (Harold Kushner) The newspaper headlines will still speak of violence and tragedy. The T.V. and radio bulletins will be no less alarming. But we will be able to engage life with more courage and more confidence because God is present with us. God does not, God cannot promise us happy outcomes in a world where laws of nature and human cruelty take their daily toll. God’s promise is not that we will be safe, but that we will never be alone.

Perhaps this meaningful presence of God is best expressed in a story Marge Carpenter, a past moderator of our General Assembly, relates from one of her visits with a family. The little boy prayed, “Dear God, please take care of my daddy, my mommy, my sister and my brother, and my doggy and me. And please, take care of yourself, God. If anything happens to you, we’re gonna be in a big mess.” That’s a genuine sense of faith in being together in this journey.

The second feature of God’s shepherding us is caught in the words, “I shall not want.” If the Lord is my shepherd, what more do I need? This focuses on being grateful for what we have and recognizing that we live in hope that God will continue to provide what’s best for us and for the world. It doesn’t mean that we won’t yearn, long, or aspire for something more; we will continue to miss the people and abilities that are taken from our lives as loved ones die and skills diminish. But we never need to feel deprived because we experience new life and the blessing we have with the Shepherd of Life.

A related feature of new life is the Spirit within us who helps us grow closer to God and transforms our focus from our own self-centeredness to closer identification with the Lord and the divine way. Because of God’s grace in enfolding us in Christ, we are more capable of choosing to be good, choosing to love and be generous, choosing to be forgiving as we have been forgiven. It is important for each of us not to be so busy, so into work, our families, our commitments, that we forget to nourish our spiritual growth and faith journey. The picture of the shepherd and the sheep is one of nourishment, guidance, and protection to grow. God does not protect us from all pain and loss, but enables us to avoid letting pain and loss define our lives.

Martin Buber, the philosopher theologian once tried to explain the difference between theology and religious faith. He declared that theology is “talking about God” while religious faith is “experiencing God.” The difference he suggested was the difference between reading a menu and eating dinner. Theology can be enlightening; it can help us understand. But only ongoing contact with God can nourish our spirits. Marcus Borg in his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, reflects, “Believing in Jesus in the sense of giving one’s heart to Jesus is the movement from second-hand religion to first-hand religion; from having heard about Jesus with hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of God. Ultimately, Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, but a figure of the present – the living Jesus who comes to us even now.”

The Psalmist provides a new perspective on the whole issue of evil that Christ demonstrated and managed in his life, death and resurrection. The writer does not deny but recognizes the existence of evil. He does not use the often-heard platitude that there is nothing to fear because everything is part of God’s plan and ultimately works out for the best nor does he say that evil befalls only people who deserve it. Rather, he is just as vulnerable to it as anyone else, but that doesn’t frighten him because God is real and present and he is identified with God in his life journey. God’s promise was never that life would be fair, but rather when we had to face unfairness and the evil we inevitably do, we would not face it alone, for the Good Shepherd, the Lord, would be with us, especially when we have to do or go through something fearful, painful, or exceedingly difficult. He is the one who is with us when we are tempted to feel that the world has abandoned us. He is the one who is with us when we feel alone in the Valley of the Shadow.

This realization means that when bad things happen to us, we don’t have to have an explanation, a justification or even acceptance of them. Instead the challenge is to survive them and to go on living with the awareness of God being with us affirming life in the face of loss,

affirming goodness and justice in the face of evil. The Lord is with us and we are with God, and, therefore, the future does not frighten us.

This awareness of the experience of life in the presence of God's Spirit led the Apostle Paul to declare. "If God is for us, who is against us? - - - for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, or rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us for the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:31,38-39) Such a realization enables discipleship to occur. This experience cries out for us to risk our faith in witness, compassion, and actions of mercy and of justice. We cannot be passive and laid back in our faith knowing that God will never leave us or forsake us. That would be very cheap grace. Rather we are called as God's community of faith, his "flock," in response to our awe and gratitude for God's full provision for us in Jesus Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, which we've been studying in adult education, puts it this way, "People of faith must not fear men. Men can do them no harm, for the power of men ceases with the death of the body. But they must overcome the fear of death with the fear of God. The danger lies not in the judgment of men, but in the judgment of God, not in the death of the body, but in the eternal destruction of body and soul. Those who are still afraid of men have no fear of God, and those who have fear (or awe) of God have ceased to be afraid of men. All preachers of the gospel will do well to recollect this saying daily."

The incomparable gift of life we have received demands that we reach out in meaningful ways to share that gift with others. Disciples, "followers" of Christ are called upon to disregard their own way, their own security, their own sufferings, their own reward to undertake the goal of focusing their actions on behalf of the transformation of others. How much is this the driving force in each of our lives? The presence and purpose of the Good Shepherd demands it.

Finally, the author of the Twenty-Third Psalm, after meditating on all the good things God provides, saves the best assurance until last. God who has provided him with a relative peaceful livable world, who has stilled the raging waters around and within him, who has led him through the Valley of the Shadow – gives him the ultimate gift: He has invited him into his home, into his presence where he can live all of his days. You have discovered what God is about and his relationship with you. This is not some future dream, pie in the sky, but a current daily living reality. This is the God who said to Abraham, to Joseph, to Moses, to the saints and followers in every generation, "Fear not for I will be with you." You have found me, and I will not abandon you.

When I was an army chaplain in Germany over thirty years ago, I remember the shepherd and his large flock who occupied a large portion of one of our tactical sites. During my three years there, I saw him many times – in all kinds of weather, in the daytime and at night – he and his dog. To me he was a picture of unbelievable faithfulness. Like that shepherd who watches the flock day and night, the Lord will be with you in sunshine and shadow, in happy times and tragic times. The declaration is "my way is your way." My presence is your peace and genuine security. So, each of us has this question to answer – "Is the Lord my Shepherd?" May God's grace be real and may we respond as followers who walk in his presence. So may it be.

Amen

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