

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Readings: Psalm 23

John 10:1-10

Psalm 23 (N.I.V)

A psalm of David.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

³ he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

John 10:1-10 The Parable of the Shepherd

¹⁰ Jesus said, "I am telling you the truth: the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The man who goes in through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him; the sheep hear his voice as he calls his own sheep by name, and he leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought them out, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow someone else; instead, they will run away from such a person, because they do not know his voice."

⁶ Jesus told them this parable, but they did not understand what he meant.

⁷ So Jesus said again, "I am telling you the truth: I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All others who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the



gate. Those who come in by me will be saved; they will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness.

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The reason being that the readings in the Lectionary are all about Jesus our Good Shepherd. Both readings today are probably well known to you. The first Psalm 23, is the psalm even those who possibly have never opened a bible will have heard. It is sung at weddings, funerals, baptisms, and was even the theme tune to the BBC series *The Vicar of Dibley*. The passage in John's gospel tells of Jesus reminding his followers that He is the Good Shepherd.

Both readings seem appropriate at this time because we are in the season of Spring, and for those in the countryside, sheep and newborn lambs are a common sight. The lambs in the field next to us were born several weeks ago now, and have already transformed from cute little lambs bleating for their mothers, into a flock or gang of teenager-like lambs that gather in corners of the field together and then head off to seek out some mischief, before being called back by their mums.

David, the writer of Psalm 23 had been a shepherd himself. In those days it was the job of the youngest son in the family. David, as we know, didn't stay a shepherd for long but went on to become the great king of Israel. By the time of the New Testament it was still a common occupation although it was not a particularly desirable or well-regarded profession since it involved living out in the hills with the flock, even sleeping with them to protect them from predators. It was a dirty, antisocial and sometimes dangerous occupation.

The imagery of the shepherd in Psalm 23 is one of great comfort, hence its' use at so many services. Through the words we are invited, with David, to experience God as our Shepherd. During these current times of uncertainty and worry it seems a perfect psalm to enter into and feel the comfort it provides.

The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

Or to put it another way - 'What I have in God is greater than what I don't have in life'. All we have accumulated in life is just 'stuff', and it is all transitory. When we die we don't take anything with us. When John D Rockefeller died, his accountant was asked, 'He was so wealthy, how much did he actually leave?' The accountant's reply? 'All of it.' Not only is our 'stuff' not really ours, for we can't take it with us, but it is not really us. Jesus tells us 'a person's true life is not made up of the things he owns, no matter how rich he may be.' (Luke 12:15). Everything we truly need in life - faith that God is in control, forgiveness for sins, an anchor for every storm, we can find in The Lord, our Shepherd.

**2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
3 he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.**

The shepherd's job was to lead sheep to pastures where they could feed. In the Middle East, the lower pastures that were easily accessible very quickly became over grazed and bare. A shepherd would need to lead his sheep higher up the slopes to find better areas in which the sheep could eat and rest. He would need to find pools of water for them to drink. But the paths across the mountain side were treacherous, and sheep are notorious for going their own way. The shepherd would need to keep an eye on his flock and gather them back when they went astray.

Jesus tells us that He is our Good Shepherd. He leads us, His flock. Notice that Jesus 'leads' - He doesn't expect us to go anywhere that He hasn't first gone Himself. He is always ahead of us showing us the way. So often we head off in our own direction, thinking we know a better route or way to go. But if we want to find peace and strength and a place of rest for our soul, then we need to follow Jesus, our Shepherd.

**4 Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.**

Shepherd's would carry a staff, or crook as we would know it, together with a rod. The rod was a little like a policeman's baton with a knob on the end. It would be used to ward off dangerous animals that tried to attack the sheep. The shepherd was prepared and properly equipped to protect his sheep. Other bible translation write these verses differently. '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.' (King James Version). Jesus has been through the valley of the shadow of death, through deepest darkness on the cross at his crucifixion, and has come out the other side, victorious. He has gone before us, but someday our Shepherd will return to take us to the high mountain by way of that deepest, darkest valley. He will be with us, protecting us, and will guide us safely to His House on the other side.

**5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.**

Once the shepherd has led his flock to the high ground and has navigated the treacherous paths, and kept them safely together, his next job is to find the good pasture on which they can feed. There will still be wild animals and snakes ready to attack and the shepherd is ready to protect his flock. The shepherd would use oil to help protect his sheep. Rubbing oil on the nose of the sheep would protect them from flies, and the smell also repelled snakes. Oil would also have been used on cuts and abrasions to prevent them from becoming infected. So oil would be used both preventively and for healing. Sheep aren't the only ones who need preventive care. Sheep aren't the only ones who need a healing touch. Like the sheep we too have a shepherd who will tend to us.

In order to be anointed the sheep must stand still, lower their heads and let the shepherd do his work. The sheep doesn't understand why the oil repels the flies or why it heals the wounds. All the sheep knows is that something happens in the presence of the shepherd.

And that's all we need to know as well. We need to go to Him, our Good Shepherd, lower our heads before Him, and trust in Him. Go. Bow. Trust.

**⁶Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,**

These must be some of the sweetest verses ever written. There are many translations of these words. The Good News Bible says 'I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life; and your house will be my home as long as I live'

The Message says '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.'

The first words are: 'surely' or 'I know'. David didn't say 'Maybe' or 'Possibly' or 'I have a hunch'. David believed in a sure God, who makes sure promises and provides a sure foundation. Our minds may shift, but God doesn't. Our minds may change, but God doesn't. Our devotion may falter, but God's never does. He is a sure God. It is because God is a sure God that we, like David, can state: 'Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.'

**...and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.**

'Where will you live forever? In the house of the Lord. If His house is your 'forever home', what does that make this earthly house? You got it! Short-term housing. This is not our home.'

Which is why we sometimes feel homesick. Not quite at home here anymore. The twists and turns of life have a way of reminding us - we aren't home here. This is not our homeland. We aren't fluent in the languages of disease and death. The culture confuses the heart, the noise disrupts our sleep, and we feel far from home.

And you know what? That's OK.

You have an eternal address fixed in your mind. Deep down you know you are not home yet. So be careful not to act like you are.'(Max Lucado - Travelling Light)

At the moment life does feel very much like a foreign country. We don't know the rules, or how to behave. We don't know how to relate to each other in meaningful ways anymore. Everything has changed. But Psalm 23 reminds us that God never changes. He is our sure foundation and we can trust in Him. He is walking alongside us, leading us, through faith in Him we find all that we could possibly ever need. If God can make a billion galaxies, can't He make good out of our bad and sense out of our faltering lives? Of course He can. He is God.

Jesus tells us this again in John's gospel. He is our Good Shepherd. He knows each one of us by name. Everything we need we can find in Him. We just need to listen for His voice calling us and turn to listen to Him. Then we can follow Him out through the gate into fresh new pasture where He will restore our soul. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us - not some, not most, not nearly all - but **all** the days of our life.

Amen

Music: sit quietly and listen again to the words of Psalm 23:

Stuart Townend - The Lord's my Shepherd.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN4tPkX0MG0>

Prayer:

O Lord, our Shepherding God,
come close to us now
Come near us in our time of need.

Shepherding God,
we need you in our time of anxiety.
We need you in our time of economic uncertainty.
We need you in a time of a globe-trotting disease.
We need you to bind our wounds,
and pour your healing ointment on our heads .
We need the briars, and brambles, and burrs
pulled out of our fleece and skin.

Shepherding God.
you guide us with your voice,
Help us to listen and follow no matter where your voice leads.
Help us to trust you.

Shepherding God,
protect us from the hired hands
that do not really care for us

and have neglected or abused us in the past.

Shepherding God,
thank you for your Son
who lay down his life for those who follow him
and for those who are not in the fold yet..

Lord we pray for those who don't know the shepherd,
whose life circumstances kept them from knowing the good shepherd.
We pray that by our actions, our behaviour,
and our reaching out into the community,
they may come to know you.

Shepherding God,
renew us, guide us with your love
and renew us with your peace. **Amen**

~ written by Rev. Abi and posted on her **Long and Winding Road** blog.