



Today, I want to begin by saying that of all the “sheep farms” I’ve worked on (in 44 years of ministry) First Church United Methodist Church, Port Angeles, ranks at the very top. That is meant to be a complement! I got the phrase from the Facebook page of Pear Tree Farm, located just west of town, which declares, “If you want a working sheep farm experience with love and real life, come visit Adrienne and Jim.” Could that not be an invitation to church? Come visit us—a real place where there is plenty of sheep, plenty of love and plenty of work to do? You can just about pick your chore.

Welcome to God as Shepherd Sunday. The idea is found in Genesis, Ezekiel, the Psalms, and of course in John’s Gospel, the one we just read. For John, God is mysteriously revealed in our ability to see Jesus as the Good Shepherd, one who is sent to welcome and lead his followers, who hear his voice. The images that flow from today’s readings include gate, provider, protector, rescuer and guide, which I believe reinforce my two favorite images: God as center and circumference; I can work those two words into just about any sermon. In Psalm 23, a tender, homely, farm-spun song, God is simply our Home, the Reality from which we come and to which we return and in which we abide.

Our Jewish ancestors knew this to be true, even before an adequate theology was developed. They had learned that they could not live without God, and hunched that God could not live without them, so they built a container—the ark of the Covenant, and they came to believe that God resided in that portable device. And they decided to take it wherever they traveled, a tangible reminder that God traveled with them wherever they went. This, you may remember, is what M. Craig Barnes discovered, the 17-year-old boy I introduced to you last Sunday, on a snow-packed road while hitchhiking from Long Island to Dallas. Not that he had to literally transport God, but that, even in a valley experience, God was with him, because God was his home wherever he wandered. There is no place where God is not, because God is the road we travel, as well as the sign we follow. God is Shepherd and host, pasture and valley, mansion and fortress, still water and open gate. God is bread for the journey and the wine of arrival.

It is the perfect Sunday take a closer look at Psalm 23, a favorite one to recite, but one we seldom investigate verse by verse, image by image. Sigmund Mowinkel, in his book *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, reminds us that songs as personal as Psalm 23 were written out of the poet’s experience of a community’s enthusiasm, exaltation and corporate lament. In other words, Psalm 23 speaks to us because it speaks all of the truth, the good and bad, and in a sentence it is this: God promises to be present.

Think with me about “green pastures” and “still waters.” They serve as metaphors that vividly describe the fullness of God’s care. Do you know that you cannot make a sheep lie down? I’ve not tried, but I’ve read that a sheep will not lie down until special provisions have been made. First of all, a sheep must be free of fear. Secondly, its coat must be cleared of the parasites that would irritate if the sheep were to lie down on the ground. And perhaps most importantly, a sheep will not lie down until it is feed. And “still water?” Why is this important? Still water runs deep and doesn’t frighten sheep. They will not go close to running, fast moving water. Its heavy wool coat is easily soaked, and once soaked it can easily drown.

“The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me beside still water, restores my soul.” The word for “soul” and the personal pronoun are synonymous. “The Lord restores me.” Have you said it lately? “The Lord restores me.”

The phrase, “Thou prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies,” is filled with meaning when understood in the context of the nomadic customs of the time. Early in the season, even before all the snow has melted by the spring sun, the shepherd will make a preliminary survey into the rough, flat-topped tableland, high above in the summer range. He will look it over with care, sometimes on his hands and knees, pulling out the weeds and briars that might cause harm or injury to the flock. And now add to that the wonderful custom that if you could reach a friend’s table, in his tent, your enemies would not attack until you finished eating, because the meal was a sacred act. For Christians, there’s an echo of this custom in our gathering around the Lord’s table for the sacrament of Holy Communion. Somehow, when in God’s presence in that special way, we know protection and relief.

“Thou anoint my head with oil, my cup, or my life, overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Any shepherd knows that summer time is “fly time.” I read somewhere that sheep are especially troubled by the “nose fly.” For relief, they deliberately scratch their heads against brush, trees and rocks. At the first sign of flies among the flock, the shepherd will apply an ointment made up of olive oil, sulfur and spices. Once applied, the aggravation and restlessness begin to disappear and the healing activated.

The “anointing” in the Hebrew and later Christian traditions means “the blessing of the Lord” or “the joy of the Lord,” a sense of having God’s loving hand placed upon you. Surely, “goodness and mercy,” indeed.

The 23rd Psalm. It is beautiful, don’t you think? It is one thing to know it in your head. And it is even better to know it by heart.

On this Fourth Sunday of Easter, we profess once again that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and all who follow him recognize his voice. I am to listen for his voice, which is a desire and skill that I continue to cultivate and work to develop. Knowing his voice comes first, only then can I decide to follow his voice. And the same is true for you. To the degree that I’m following the Good Shepherd, always imperfectly, you are to follow me when you sense I’m leading as a faithful

follower. And to the degree we are listening together for his voice, we are to follow each other. To the degree that good shepherding is being practiced at this sheep farm on the corner of 7th and Laurel, it is because you and I, together, have found a way to be trustworthy shepherds.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells of a wonderful relationship she had with her best friend's mother, whose name is Lee; she was a kind of shepherd to Anne when Anne was a little girl. Lamott writes:

“I basked in Lee's love like a lizard on sunny rocks. Lee lay beside me in bed when I couldn't sleep and whispered the Twenty-third Psalm to me: ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want—I am not wanting for anything, Annie, let's find a green pasture inside us to rest in, let's find the still waters within.’ She'd lie beside me quietly for a while as we listened to the tide of the lagoon lap against the dock. And as she recited the psalm, she paused to pray for the Good Shepherd to gather my thoughts like sheep. I did not quite believe in the power of God, because my frightened lamby thoughts seemed to be stampeding toward a wall, piling up on each other's backs, bleating while their wild eyes darted around frantically. But I believed in Lee, and I felt her arms around me....” (Pg. 15)

Everyone I know needs a shepherd like that in their lives. Don't you think? May we continue to follow the Good Shepherd and in so doing become good shepherds ourselves. Amen.