

Easter 4C, 2013

Text: John 10:22-30

Title: The Good Shepherd

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When there is a death in the congregation, and I sit down with the family to talk about the funeral, there's one Bible verse that always comes up. Psalm 23. Almost everyone wants to have Psalm 23 prayed at their loved one's funeral. And when we pick out the cover for the bulletin, more than half the time it's the green one with all the sheep and Psalm 23 on it.

Why is that? Why is this verse so popular? Why do so many people find comfort in this picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd?

It's nothing new. When they go digging around in the earliest Christian graves they can find, the oldest pictures of Jesus are of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Psalm 23, you probably remember, was written by King David, the David who was a shepherd himself, tending his flock on the hills of Bethlehem, the David who fought off lions and bears with a sling shot and some rocks.

Even when David became King of Israel, he was still a shepherd.

The king of a country was considered its shepherd. Even the Pharaoh of Egypt carried a small shepherd's crook as a scepter.

But David said, "The Lord is my Shepherd." David was a shepherd himself, but he knew that he needed a shepherd, too.

David looked to the Lord to guide him and provide for him, to give him food and water, to protect him in the face of death.

One reason why we love Psalm 23 so much is the beautiful picture of life in the shepherd's care: green pastures, still waters, walking in the paths of righteousness. Much of our life is dark and dreary. We long for greener pastures and we trust the Lord to lead us there.

We know that we may have to go through the valley of the shadow of death, but even there He is with us, guiding and protecting us. He will feed us and bless us and bring us safely home to live with him forever.

It's a comforting picture, especially as we face death and suffering in this life. It's a picture of peace and serenity.

But how do we get there? How does the Lord become our shepherd and we his sheep? How do we end up in the green pastures, by the still waters, with food on the table and cup overflowing?

To answer that, we need Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the one who fulfills this Psalm. When Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd," this is the type of shepherd He is talking about, the kind of shepherd that David sang of in Psalm 23. Jesus is the Good Shepherd that David sang about. Apart from Jesus, Psalm 23 is just a wish, a dream, a beautiful picture and nothing else.

The only way that Psalm 23 does you any good is if Jesus makes Himself your shepherd. There are lots of sheep out there, but not all of them belong to Jesus.

In our Gospel, Jesus meets some strange sheep, some sheep who belong to another shepherd. These are the Pharisees. They come to make demands of Jesus. They come looking for Jesus to do things their way.

Jesus has been doing signs, His works that should have shown everyone who He really was. He changed water into wine. He healed a man born blind and the paralyzed man at Bethesda. He fed the 5000. These signs should have been enough for the Pharisees to understand who Jesus was.

But the Pharisees didn't want signs. They didn't want to have to trust and believe in Jesus. They wanted something plain and clear. "Just come right out and tell us, Jesus!"

Jesus said, "You don't get me because you're not listening. You don't believe in me because you're not listening."

To be a sheep means to listen. To follow.

That, we're not so good at. We'd rather talk than listen. We'd rather lead than follow. We'd rather tell Jesus what He needs to do to be a proper shepherd. We want him to do things our way.

Instead of following, we decide to wander off and go our own direction. And when we do, the results aren't pretty.

This morning we'll be starting our reading of Proverbs as a congregation. And many of the Proverbs are calls to listen to Jesus and follow him.

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12)

When you go your own way, it only leads to death. When you are separated from the Good Shepherd and His flock, you are an easy target for the wolves and the bears, you can slip and fall, you can even starve.

Sin is going your own way. Sin is wandering from your shepherd and from the rest of the flock.

Instead in Proverbs 3:5-6 the Lord says to you:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
and do not lean on your own understanding.

<sup>6</sup> In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.

Trust in the Lord. That's faith, listening and following your Shepherd, confessing your sins, looking to Him for forgiveness, realizing that you don't have all the answers, that you don't always know the right way to go.

And even when you don't have the strength to follow, even when your own strength fails, your Good Shepherd picks you and carries you the rest of the way.

The best part of our Gospel lesson comes at the very end.

Jesus, your Good Shepherd, holds you in hand. It doesn't get any better than that. When you're weak and tired, when you just can't keep up with the rest of the flock, when you keep losing your way and going astray, your Good Shepherd picks you up and carries you. And nothing can snatch you out of your Good Shepherd's hands.

This is why the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, this picture of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is so comforting in the face of death. Nothing can snatch you out of His hand. Nothing.

Bombs cannot snatch you out of his hands, nor bullets or plane crashes or any other weapons of terror. Your Good Shepherd is stronger than all of them.

Explosions and accidents cannot snatch you out his hands, nor floods or fires, or any other disaster. Your Good Shepherd is stronger than all of them.

Illness and disease cannot snatch you out his hands, not cancer or Alzheimers or any other affliction. Your Good Shepherd is stronger than all of them.

All these things are stronger than you. All these things can snatch you away from this world and all those whom you love. But they are not stronger than your Good Shepherd. Your Good Shepherd is stronger than even death itself. Death could not hold Him, and death will not snatch you out of His nail scarred hands.

Even in death, Jesus is your Good Shepherd. St. John writes, "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne is their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

That's why Psalm 23 is such a wonderful picture in the face of death. The saints, the baptized, those in white robes are living in Psalm 23 right now, because Jesus, the Lamb of God is their Good Shepherd, and your shepherd, too.

And no one, nothing, no power in heaven or on earth can snatch you out of his hands.