

Sermon, May 7, 2023
Psalm 23

“The Lord is My Shepherd”

Ellen Cherry, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary writes, “ In a scant fifty-five words the psalmist brings us the most beloved text of the Bible. We cling to life through it when the angel of death stalks our path. We recite it to face down danger and fear when they lung out in the dark. We sing it as we long to live the mercy that we need to dwell in the house of the Lord every day of our life. Such is the comforting eloquence of the Twenty- third Psalm”.

It is true that we hear this reading most often at funerals, but it touches many other aspects of our lives.

A few days ago, I was watching an interview with the late Joseph Campbell, considered one of the world’s leading experts on mythology, and he made a comment that I found very interesting, saying that all too often we read the Bible as prose, when we should read it as poetry. By this he did not mean that the whole Bible is written in poetic form, but that as with most poetry we must search for the deeper meanings behind the words.

Of course, as with all the psalms the 23rd is written in poetic form. It begins with a metaphor- “The Lord is my shepherd”. The imagery of a shepherd appears numerous times in the scriptures. For example, King David began as a shepherd. In the Gospel of Matthew, the first people to which the angels chose to tell of the birth of Jesus were shepherds, and in the Gospel of John Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd”. In the history of art the first known painted image of Jesus appears in one of the Roman catacombs depicted as a young man bearing a lamb across his shoulders.

The job of a shepherd is twofold - one, to provide for the sheep, that is, to lead them to still waters to drink, and to green pastures to eat. But in our terms, I think it means more than God providing us with our bodily needs. The image of still waters, and lying down in green pastures, speaks to the fact that we live in a chaotic world, and can also suffer from anxiety from living in such a world, but somewhere deep down inside of us there is a place of peace and tranquility- and if we heed the guidance of the Lord, placing our trust in Him, we can find that place within. The psalmist also writes, “I shall not want”. A shepherd leads a flock not to what they want, but what they need - perhaps it is the same with us, that it could be the case that the things we want may blind us to what we need. The second job of a shepherd is to protect the flock, to keep them safe from the dangers that come from wolves or from sheep rustlers. Perhaps God protects us by leading us from the things we want towards that which we need, and by leading us to that place of tranquility protecting us from being overcome by fear and anxiety.

As the psalm says, “ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me”. We are also told he leads us in right paths, not only for our sake but for God’s as well. When we do what is right and good and loving, it glorifies the Lord.

I used to have a problem with some of the psalms, because there seems to be a lot of violence and smiting of one’s enemies going on - an attitude not exactly congruent with the teachings of Jesus. But then someone pointed out to me that we can also see this in poetic and metaphorical terms - that the enemies referred to are not other people, but, instead, our own inner demons, I.e., forces and thoughts within us that drag us down and bring us personal agonies and defeats.

Instead , God anoints our heads with oil, symbolically speaking of God’s blessing, and goodness and mercy follow us when we walk the pathways divinely opened before us, not for a day, a week , a month, or year, but our whole life long - a promise echoed for us in the words of the Risen Christ - “I am with you always, to the end of the age”. Amen.

Let us pray: God of love and Grace, we praise your holy name and give thanks for the gift of this day. Help us today, and in all the days to come, to face the challenges before us, as well as the chaotic nature of today’s world. We thank you for sending to us your Son, the good shepherd, who can lead us to still waters and green pastures, to find the peace and tranquility we need, and which is revealed to us when we are blessed with the grace of faith. Open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts, to the pathways the shepherd leads us down - help us to do so with confidence and courage. Help us to defeat the enemies that lurk inside of us, which stand in the way of us being all that we can be and doing all that we can do. We are ready to serve, Lord, when you are ready to point the way...Amen.