

Sculpting a Shepherd – April 10, 2016
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Sculpting a Shepherd Psalm 23

If I asked you to close your eyes and think about Jesus, what would come to your mind? When I do this, two images appear: Jesus standing at an old wooden door, and Jesus as the Good shepherd. I believe this happens because these were pictures I often saw in Sunday School.

I think the twenty-third psalm is the most familiar and loved psalm. In worship settings this Psalm and the Lord's prayer are often found together. I remember having memorized both in Sunday School. As an icon, "The Good Shepherd" may be found in hymns, fine art, and innumerable commercial products.

In St. John's Gospel we discover another of Jesus' "I 'am" statements: "I am the Good Shepherd." These words conjure up in our minds a vision of comfort, care, and strength that pulls on our hearts. King David writing here motivates us to meditate on the goodness and love of God. Using the metaphor of the shepherd, I find myself focusing on how Jesus guides us to the peaceful places, where we notice how beautiful are the surroundings he has provided for us. We feel protected because of trust in our Shepherd, even up to, and including, the process of death. King David reminds us of the loveliness and generosity of Jesus, forever desiring to share family dinner with us.

Icons are beautiful, and they do provide a way of calling us back to meditating on our spiritual journey, but they can become too familiar. And you know what the 'familiar' sometimes breeds. If we are not careful, that which is so compelling and enchanting may only get lost in the mundane.

This is paramount because the imagery used in this psalm is richly united with trust. It's true that the psalm speaks of peacefulness, but it screams of relationship. While the closest I have come to sheep is the fleece in my slippers, I do know a little

about them. Shepherds live with their sheep. They do this to protect the sheep from enemies, wild and domestic, but primarily to protect the sheep from themselves.

In the same way, God takes care of us. God sweeps us into a relationship with him and with each other. God invites everyone to follow in trust and fidelity. As shepherds do, they walk in front of the sheep, and the sheep follow. They follow because they know his voice. When you are in a loving relationship, you learn the real voice of the one loving you. Occasionally, our Shepherd will come alongside to help us stay on the road less travelled, and to assist us in our following. But, he never pushes from behind. It is the butcher who drives the sheep from the rear, not the shepherd.

Psalms twenty-three is unique in many ways. It shines a light on the entire human experience from still waters, overflowing cups, and gladness that comes from being restored, to the stagger toward the valley of the shadow of death. On life's pilgrimage, we find danger, adversaries, scarcity, and hard places. For many of us the pantry is nearly empty, our cup less than half-full, and bills past due. Anxiety perches on our shoulders like a bird of prey. We sense panic at our door.

King David is not ignorant of all of this. He has been through it all. Still, he writes, "The Lord is my shepherd." It is the power of God that enables you and I to walk through our valleys securely, without fear. We are empowered to walk because of our trust in the promises of God: That goodness and mercy WILL follow us everywhere and everyday that we live. And we will live in those condos that Jesus told us about in St. John's Gospel. The Lord is our shepherd.

Theologians sometimes speak in 'long' words . . . They get paid to do so. For example, the 'Omni' ones: Omnipotent= all-powerful; Omniscient= all-knowing. Here, I want to use Omnipresent: God is always here. We know this because we read and sing about it during the Season of Advent: Emmanuel-God with us. God is always with us. Always. Here. With. Us. This is not a threat, as I thought when a child, but a gift, a blessing. We are never alone. While it may be true we might not recognize it; it is none-the-less true.

Last Sunday we had a table meal together, the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. It is always, among other things, a feast of peace and reconciliation. Here the psalmist reminds us that together we share a common connection. In mid-eastern culture, if you eat together you cannot fight for at least a few days following the meal. There must be a truce. May haps, our government could learn from this.

To eat at table with an enemy was to treat her or him as a friend. God, our Good Shepherd, displays the sweetness of God's love that dispels our desire for revenge, and feeds us with the spiritual fruit of peace, love, and joy.

You and I live in a world of shadow and light. And even when we walk through the deepest shadow, we know that we stand in the shadow of the cross of Jesus, our Good Shepherd. As we live in faith and hope through life's shadows, painful though they are, we proclaim the promise of Easter. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, stands with us. As kindness and love, courage and power, he always brings life from death. Our lives change, as it sometimes seems moment by moment, but God never changes. The same yesterday, today, and forever. His love is everlasting. The Lord IS OUR shepherd! Alleluia. Amen.