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Shepherding Isn't For Sissies
4/25/2021 Easter 4B

This Sunday is known as Shepherd Sunday, for obvious reasons - starting with the Hebrew Scriptures' Psalm 23, all the lectionary texts focus on the analogy?/ metaphor?/ description? of God as shepherd, and Jesus referring to himself as the Good Shepherd. How many of us here grew up among farmers who had flocks of sheep, goats or cows that had to be managed? (Wow, several of us!) I'm a suburban girl myself, and daughter of folks from the coal mines of West VA, so know little about shepherding first hand. Although I've preached this text a bunch of times, I still went to my favorite Google to try and learn about shepherding then and shepherding now. I found some fine YouTube videos about shepherds and shepherding - doesn't look like it's changed a lot, except that folks in Wales and Scotland use Border Collies as sheep dogs, whereas other cultures don't. (If you get a chance, check out a video called Sheep Herding With Lights for some really tricky use of border collies, and some intricate planning for the fun of these shepherds.) In some countries, shepherding seems to be going on like it was in Jesus' time. All in all, it's hard work and long days, and involves lots of messy, earthy, smelly realities. The work of milking and turning that into cheese is a long, hard process with many steps. And shearing the sheep for wool takes a lot of steps.

Some folks who are returning to homesteading or seeking to live sustainably, are raising goats for their milk and cheeses - same work! For cows, it seems like things have become more industrialized - at least in more industrialized countries. Poorer peoples and poorer countries can still show us how time-consuming and how much work was involved in sustaining life using animal products.

King David, who we assume was author of the 23rd Psalm, was the youngest son in his family, and sent out to watch the sheep. We like to picture him idling away the boring hours playing his harp. But he also had long daylight hours of moving the sheep to where there was fodder or water, keeping them from following the stubborn one who strayed off - he did have to pay attention. And there are even stories in Scripture of how he took on and killed a bear that threatened the sheep, and another place where he had to take on and kill a lion. Predators like sheep! Sheep can kick hard, and they can run up rocky hills where other animals can't - but they are easy prey, otherwise. Shepherds have to be ready to encounter danger in order to keep their flock safe.

There are predators as well as diseases that can attack sheep, goats, cows, and other animals we have domesticated. Watching out for them can be a 24/7 thing, with all kinds of sudden surprises. It's not a job for sissies, nor a job for folks who like it easy.

Our culture has moved beyond the survival aspect of herding animals, at least the urban and suburban culture - there are still farms, obviously - we all still need food, and we still depend on animal products. Much of our style of living, though, is several steps removed from the day-to-day reality of dealing with animals and crops. We shop in stores for meat, milk, cheese, eggs, leather, veggies, fruits, clothes made with wool or cotton or silk, and don't get our hands messy with the realities of animal husbandry, and the making of all these products.

I have to admit that the 23rd Psalm runs more to the comforting aspects of being shepherded. The shepherd sees to the sheeps' needs of green pastures (food) and still water (water that flows slowly enough to not be dangerous). The shepherd has skill with some basic tools like a rod and a shepherd's staff, to protect the sheep, and to guide them in the right paths - even through some scary areas. When we read the 23rd Psalm, we feel the safety of being in God's care, we feel a trust in being provided for, we feel protected from the ills of the world. I guess that actually, our amount of protection and provision depends on the quality of the shepherd....David writes that since God is our shepherd, we shall not want. Jesus says that he's not like a hired hand, who might run off if it gets too scary, like if a wolf attacks - Jesus is more like the one to whom the sheep are precious - the one to whom they belong. When we read Jesus' words about the Good Shepherd, we are also comforted, knowing whose hands we are in.

I want to look at this analogy/ illustration about God from a couple of angles this morning. First, I want to look at the work of the shepherd, and what that tells us about God. The shepherd has to have foresight in order to look out for what the sheep need - has to know where the grass is growing, where the good streams are. And the shepherd has to know the balance of these that the sheep need. Then the shepherd has to guide the sheep to the fields and water - whether with staff or sheep dogs, the shepherd has to know the way, and have the skills to lead the sheep there. Maybe lead, maybe prod, maybe urge or nudge, maybe sometimes kind of force....the sheep dogs bark and nip and run around to catch stragglers....And all the time, the shepherd has to keep an eye out for predators. At lambing time, the shepherd has to be ready to jump in and help a difficult birth. Probably the shepherd has to break up fights sometimes, too. In the videos I watched, the shepherds seemed to have names for their sheep, and know who the troublemakers are, who the slow ones are, who the bullies are and so on -

they know their sheep - more in the smaller herds I suppose. Most cultures have pens or some kind of safety plans in place for the nights, so shepherds can rest.

The shepherd has a hard job - God has a hard job watching out for us humans and our needs. Our lives can get messy, and complicated, too; we can forget to take a sabbath time and get burned out, we can get drawn away by something glittery and need to be brought back. We'll follow weird leaders because they sound good, and not think too much about where they're taking us.... We have times in our lives when we need to be prodded and encouraged, times when we need a sharp "no." For wrong doors to close and right doors to open.

The second thing I want to comment on is this: All this about God's care is not to say we don't have some responsibility for ourselves - although the care of God is spread over us, we still have the responsibility to make the best decisions we can, to avoid what God has told us is harmful, to plan and think ahead as intelligently as we can. We know that we have a need for good rest and healthy food; we know that certain behaviors lead us down wrong paths. We know how to learn, to think, to observe - we have skills in maths and sciences and interpersonal relationships. We know honesty, we know respect, we know how to work together, we know how to give, and how to love.

I do think God helps us even in the small details, and that it's right and good to take any and all concerns to God in prayer. God is in the small details as well as the overarching plans and outcomes. I do think that, in terms of living, we are dependent on God's Spirit to a degree we can't see - even for the laws of nature to continue to be depended on. Yet we aren't so dependent that we can do all the wrong things and expect there to be no consequences, and expect our Shepherd will make it all come out right. We interact with God - we have brains, emotions, creativity, insight - we are, after all, created in God's image. Even sheep do their own walking and nursing and eating, and their bodies do their own functioning.

The third thing I want to comment on is our tendency to romanticize the sheep and shepherd thing, like the Shakespearean "pastoral" imagery of cute shepherds and shepherdesses in a bucolic and peaceful scene, with leaves rustling from a nice breeze through the branches, the grasses waving, the birds calling, the bees buzzing --- someone playing a dance tune on the pipes, and madrigals singing fa-la-la-la-la....Like the front of Hallmark cards perhaps, or a serene painting of a naturalscape. God as our shepherd isn't often in this kind of scene - life is messy, life is hard, life is complicated.

In my vacation at the beach, I left the sliding doors of my room on the 6th floor open so I could continually hear the waves, smell the salty breeze, and if I looked out, I could see the long view of the beachfront, the sand met by the froth of the waves, the slow moving of the clouds

through the streaks of sun. I'm keeping that vision of peace in my imagination, while at the same time I know that not far from the waves the sharks feed; that the clouds can gather into strong storms (in fact, there was a big electrical storm while I was there), that the life and death of many sea creatures is what has built up the sand and is ongoing under the waters I can see; that the change in the earth's climate is loosing more glacial melt into the oceans and starting to change shorelines around the world, that rip tides can form when the sand shifts a certain way and carry unwary swimmers out from the shore; that if I turn my back on the waves while I'm out there, the power can knock me over and rub my face in the sand. (An uncle was knocked over once and broke his back...) I know the pull of the moon on the waves makes the tides continually going out and coming in. There's always a lot more going on on the beach, and there's a lot more going on in the bucolic nature views of shepherds and sheep.

The final comment I want to make is to notice again that first verse of Psalm 23 - God is my shepherd - I shall not want. Probably not too many of us could say we have no wants - I can't say it. I want a lot of things, all the way from healthcare for all, to my sister's health, to finding a good relationship, to enough \$\$ in my retirement account, to my grandchildren to develop well and not suffer. Yet at any given moment, with God as our all in all, our loving shepherd, we have what we want. Being in the moment, as a simple sheep is, and trusting the shepherd to provide, is a skill I'm working to develop. Being in the moment, not worrying about what I can't change, not worrying about what might happen somehow or somewhere; doing what the moment requires, whether it's to love or sing or admire or caution - being present to those around me and trusting in God's sufficiency - in this moment. That kind of inner peace and security comes from knowing God is our shepherd, which will carry us through all kinds of outer events. That's what I think is the take-away from Shepherding Sunday this year - that security, that rest, that peace, of "I shall not want." May it be so. AMEN.

John 10:11-18

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Psalm 23 NRSV

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

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

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

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

CEV

1 You, LORD, are my shepherd. I will never be in need.

2 You let me rest in fields of green grass. You lead me to streams of peaceful water,

3 and you refresh my life. You are true to your name, and you lead me along the right paths.

4 I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid. You are with me, and your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe.

5 You treat me to a feast, while my enemies watch. You honor me as your guest, and you fill my cup until it overflows.

6 Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life, and I will live forever in your house, LORD

1 John 3:16-24

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments

and do what pleases him. ²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Acts 4:5-12

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, ^{*} and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷When they had made the prisoners ^{*} stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' ⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, ^{*} whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹This Jesus ^{*} is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone."^{*} ¹²There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'