

The Lord is my Shepherd

Psalm 23

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I

Before coming to Athens, our family lived for many years in Fort Worth, Texas. In terms of population, Fort Worth is now the 13th largest city in the country, but the city has never forgotten its Western heritage. In fact, every day, twice a day, a herd of real live longhorn cattle are driven by real live cowboys down Exchange Avenue in the Historic Stockyards District. When you live in Fort Worth and have out of town company, the cattle drive is one of those must-see things.

II

I think the image of the cowboy resonates with most of us on some level. It's been deeply ingrained into our American culture, in television shows and movies and advertising – a tough, rugged individual, astride a horse, lasso affixed to the saddle, six-shooter on the hip, someone who knows how to work hard and play hard.

III

Certainly, our biblical ancestors were familiar cattle and how to raise and domesticate them. But it's telling to me that one of the driving images within the biblical text is not that of a cowboy and the cattle, but of a shepherd and the sheep.

When God began to call to Moses from a burning bush and to lay out God's plan for the liberation of long-enslaved people, Moses was tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro.

Centuries later, when the administration of a corrupt king named Saul began to crumble and God set out to anoint a new king over Israel, God sent the prophet Samuel to the village of Bethlehem to the house of a man named Jesse, who was the father of seven sons. Jesse and Samuel lined up the six oldest sons, certain that God's favor had fallen on one of them. But when Samuel reached the end of the line, and the Spirit of the Lord had not spoken, Samuel asked Jesse if he had any more sons, Jesse said, yes, there's my youngest boy David, he's out in the fields tending the sheep.

Centuries later, when God set out to announce the birth of Jesus, the king of kings, the one who will rule over Israel with justice and righteousness forever, the very first people to hear the good news were shepherds, watching over their flocks by night.

Centuries later, when the empire had deported a man named John to a remote island called Patmos, John had a vision, a revelation of Jesus Christ, in which he looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every race and tribe and tongue on the earth, and they were gathered around the throne singing praises to the Lamb.

It's telling to me that our biblical ancestors, even though they were familiar with the relationship between cattle and cowhands, turn over and over again to the metaphor of sheep and their shepherd.

And nowhere is that image captured more vividly than in the Psalm that is before us, Psalm 23. This summer, we are preaching our way through the Book of Psalms, and today we come to the best-known of all the psalms, psalm 23. So listen now for a Word from God.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Of the 150 Psalms in our bibles, Psalm 23 is by far the one that is most familiar to us. I've read and studied and preached this familiar psalm countless times over the years. But I discovered I'd never noticed before as I studied it again this week.

The psalmist begins by making declarative statements about God - The Lord is my shepherd. He makes me lie down beside still waters. The psalmist begins by talking *about* God.

But something happens in the middle of the psalm, and suddenly, the psalmist is speaking *to* God – Your rod and staff comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

And right in the center of the psalm, right where that shift from talking *about* God to talking *to* God happens, lies the central confession of the psalm – You are with me.

In the Hebrew of Psalm 23, there are 26 words that come before this confession of faith, and 26 that come after it. The central confession of Psalm 23 stands like a tentpole - *You are with me*.

IV

And that, to me, my friend, is what makes the gospel of Jesus Christ so compelling. That, my friend, is what makes the Good Shepherd worth following.

As you know, cattle are driven from behind – that’s why it’s a cattle drive. But sheep are led from the front.

And the metaphor of a Good Shepherd testifies that God doesn’t just push us from behind – saying, get along little doggies. No, the gospel testifies that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ – his name, after all, is Emmanuel, which means God-with-us.

The gospel testifies that God knows what it’s like to be you, my friend. God knows first-hand what it’s like to be hungry, to be bored, to be tired, to be anxious. God knows first-hand what it is to be frightened, to feel betrayed, to be disappointed, to love someone so much that it hurts. God knows first-hand what it is to stand at the grave and weep.

Whatever you are going through this day, my friend, know this. The Lord is not your cowboy, pushing from behind or directing from above. The Lord is your shepherd, going first, leading the way. Even though you may be walking this day through the very darkest of valleys, my friend, God is *with* you. As the Apostle Paul testifies in his letter to the Romans, there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus your Lord.

The Lord is your Shepherd, my friend, and the Lord is *with* you. That is the central confession of the 23rd Psalm.

V

But even though Psalm 23 is the prayer and confession of an individual, it’s still meant to be read and sung and prayed in community. After all, most of the you’s in the bible are actually “y’all’s.” The biblical story is addressed not just to you as an individual, but to us as a community of faith. So yes, the Lord is your shepherd, but the Lord is also her Shepherd, and his Shepherd, and those people’s Shepherd, too.

And these are strange days for all of us. Someone remarked to me recently that the global pandemic is something like the whole world undergoing a stress test. In a

stress test in a doctor's office, the body is intentionally put under stress, and the systems that were relatively healthy tend to keep on functioning mostly as they always did, but those systems that were unhealthy begin to show their cracks.

And that, I think, is an excellent description of what we're all experiencing these days – a global stress test. So it's more important now than ever to remember the central confession of the 23rd psalm – the Lord is *with us*.

But there's something else about Psalm 23. I think when we picture it in our minds, we often think about Psalm 23 as a static image – almost like a postcard or a snapshot of a moment in time. There's the Good Shepherd, and there are the sheep, lying down in the green pasture.

But notice, friends, that Psalm 23 is a psalm full of *movement*. Yes, the shepherd makes the sheep lie down in green pastures, but in the very next verse, the shepherd is *leading* the sheep beside the waters and on right paths and even through the very darkest of valleys.

The shepherd is *preparing* the table and *anointing* heads and *filling* up the cups. Even goodness and mercy are not static things in Psalm 23 – they're *following* the sheep, or a better translation of the Hebrew verb is goodness and mercy are *pursing* or even *chasing* the sheep. And yes, the final verse is I shall dwell in the house of the Lord, the implication of *shall* is that we're not there yet.

The Lord is with us. That is the central confession of Psalm 23. The Lord sets the table before us and beckons us to come, to have our cup filled to the brim, to rest beside the still waters, to be loved and cherished not because of anything we've said or not said, not because of anything we've done or not done, but simply because we belong to the Good Shepherd.

And that, my friend, is such very good news. Because these are such difficult days for all of us. The global pandemic has put the whole world's systems and institutions and ways of being through a stress test.

And the church of Jesus Christ is not exempt. And for us, here at First Presbyterian Church of Athens, all the issues of race and justice and history that feel like they've been suddenly thrust front and center in the last few weeks have really been there all along.

Our church has a long history in this community, one that is about to complete its second century. There is so much to celebrate, so much for which we should give

thanks. Every single one of us who lives out our discipleship in Christ at First Presbyterian Church is a direct beneficiary of the faithful stewardship and generosity and witness to the gospel of generations of saints who have gone before us, for whom the Lord was their Shepherd.

At the same time, over the long course of two centuries, as an institution, our church did not always get it right about these issues. And just saying that out loud is hard for some of us, because it feels like we're dishonoring our parents and grandparents and those who worked so hard to build this legacy of faith that we are now called to lead and steward. Just saying that out loud makes us want to freeze up, to hunker down, to retreat to greener pastures and calmer waters and wait for this thing to blow over.

But the thing is, the Good Shepherd is on the move. The Good Shepherd loves us too much to let us lay right where we are. So the Good Shepherd beckons us to follow as he leads us in right paths for his name's sake. The Good Shepherd uses the rod and a staff to pull us along when we get stuck, to redirect us back onto the path when we stray too far. When the Good Shepherd leads us into good trouble, when the work of doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with our God creates enemies for us, the Good Shepherd lays out a picnic for us in the presence of our enemies and says, "Don't worry about them. I've got this. Come have a snack."

Even though the Shepherd may lead us through the darkest, most foreboding valleys, we need not fear, for the central confession of Psalm 23, the central confession of our faith, is that the Good Shepherd named Emmanuel – God-with-us – Jesus Christ our Lord.

And if Christ is for us, who can stand against us?

Thanks be to God. Amen.