Shepherd Care

Psalm 23

John 10: 11-18

The Lord is my Shepherd . . .

It maybe the best known selection in the Bible. It is a selection we turn to in times of challenge as we seek comfort.

But what is it that a shepherd does?

It is lonely work. A shepherd is out in the wilderness with a herd of animals. Sheep we think of mostly. The Bible is full of examples of shepherds tending the sheep.

* Sheep was how the families of Abraham and his descendants counted their wealth.
* David’s father Jesse sent him out to be a shepherd of the flock of sheep.
* The angels appeared to shepherds tending their flock of sheep to announce the good news that the Messiah had been born.

Shepherds are there to **protect** the flock. They are to guard – along with sheep dogs or any other means – they are to anticipate the need for protection from predators or threats of any sort.

The second thing a shepherd does is to provide:

The shepherd is to provide by leading the flock to a place where there is plentiful water and good grazing. The shepherd is to care for the welfare of the flock with enough food for it to grow healthy – and for it not to become the food of predators.

The third thing a shepherd is to do is to prepare the flock:

The shepherds task is to prepare the sheep to be shorn. Being shorn has a usage when applied to people that sounds like they are being taken advantage of. But with sheep it is different. The sheep have wool and the wool is the value that the sheep produce. But it sounds – kind of icky.

Why do sheep need to be shorn?

Long wool needs to be cut off in hot weather to keep the sheep cooler.

Long wool gets dirty and the dirt diminishes the value of the wool.

And it can also produce hygiene and health issues.

So a shepherd is to

* Protect the Flock
* Provide for the Flock
* Prepare the flock

Jesus said – I am the good shepherd

Jesus said he was a lot of things:

I am the Bread of Life

The light of the world

The resurrection and the life

Next week we’ll consider another saying – Jesus says I am the true vine and my father the vine grower . . .

But this saying of Jesus as shepherd grabs our imagination in a way that resonates through our culture and language.

Old Testament Theologian Walter Bruggeman that Psalm 23 is one that opens us to receive God’s gifts in a way that almost unparalleled. It asserts a confidence in God. He writes: *It is God’s companionship that transforms every situation. It does not mean that there are no deathly valleys, no enemies, but they are not capable of hurt. Psalm 23 knows that evil is present in the word, but it is not feared. Confidence in God is the source of a life of peace and joy.*

[From Rev. Rosemary Brown, [www.Day1.org](http://www.Day1.org) May 6, 2001]

As Christians we transfer this confidence of *The Lord is our shepherd . . .* to Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

We look to God for Protection and Provision. To be honest, I am not so certain how often we think about the shepherd’s work of Protection and Provision as being connected to the need for preparation.

But our fixation of the shepherd tells us something about what we as human being seek. We do need protection from all sorts of predators in the world – some will come from outside of us, but sometimes we face a challenge from within when our bodies turn against itself or when our likes become addictions. We need provision – the Lord to guide us and lead us to places where the water is clean and the food abundant. And also to be prepared to use and share what we have been given to find goodness and fullness in the life we have been given.

Novelist and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner recalls that later in John’s gospel there is a resurrection story of Jesus and his disciples. The Risen Lord appears to them on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has prepared a breakfast for them. He then corners Peter – remember Peter is the one that John tells us denied Christ three times in the horrid events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. [John 18: 15-18]

On the lakeshore the Risen Lord asks Peter 3 times: Simon Peter, do you love me? Three times Peter denied he knew Jesus. Three times he is asked: Do you love me? And each time he says yes. And Peter is told: *Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep.* At this point Peter is no longer a fisher of people. He is a shepherd of the flock.

It might be easy to think that this preparation is only for those called to ministry – preachers and the like. But one of the things about our Protestant heritage is that we affirm all who follow God in Jesus Christ are called to special ways of service. We all are prepared for service. Even in those times we may think we have nothing to offer, we do.

Several years ago I had just begun serving a church. A member was in the hospital and I stopped by on a Sunday afternoon. We talked about the service and his situation. I asked if he wanted to pray. I can’t tell you how many times in my almost 30 years of pastoral ministry I have done this. He said yes. We took hold of each other’s hands and I offered a prayer. I prayed for his wellbeing and health and family and witness to the world.

When I finished I let go. But he did not. He prayed a prayer to. He prayed for the church he was a member of and for me. When he said Amen he let go of my hands.

Jesus calls us also to help protect, provide and prepare for each other.

I have come to be with you in this season of your church life. It is a season of transition. Psalm 23 speaks of this: when we wander through the valley . . .

Valleys can be stark and challenging. We cannot forget the language of the KJV -the valley of the shadow of death – it holds a dark and foreboding message for us.

But I wonder if there are some things worse than death? What about when

* A person lingers on the edge of life for weeks or months or even years?
* S loved one is in the grasp of dementia not knowing who you are?
* Your plans and prospects are destroyed by a poor choice?
* When you stand on the beach expecting the wonders of relaxation and are overcome by an earthquake and tsunami that lurch from nowhere

There are other transitions in life:

* Children attending the first day of school in the fall
* high school folk getting ready to graduate
* Maybe a recent decision about work or life that seemed so good only now to discover it wasn’t what you thought it would be
* Parents selling the family home to make preparation for life’s next phase

Life is a series of transitions – not just in the church – but in our daily routine as well.

As a church you face a transition from the founding pastor to something that is next. It is not entirely known. Yet you are energetic and want to grow. That is what you survey results from last summer said. I’m not making it up. Last week the leadership looked at some of these results. Your Pastor Nominating Committee is working with these as will the Session. You have lots on your plate.

Yet there is an assurance and a hope for something that is to come. We find it in the confidence of moving forward – individually and together. As we move through our valleys – whatever they may be – there is a promise of a banquet table beyond. This is the place that the Good Shepherd is preparing for us.

Jesus said I am the good shepherd. I will work with you for protection, provision and preparation. Sometimes things don’t look like what they think they will be. Yet the vision of Psalm 23 is that there is a banquet prepared for us. Certainly that is a way to rejoice and be glad in the protection and provision. But it is also a way to know that we are prepared – not simply for this table – but for the world that awaits.

Thanks be to God.

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