

God, Our Shepherd
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NPMC - April 25, 2021

Scripture: Psalm 23, John 10:11-18, Luke 15: 1-7 (// Matthew 18:10-14)

Hymns: HWB 352 – Gentle Shepherd, Come and Lead Us (CCLI 15609)
HWB 519 Shepherd Me, O God (OL 00751)
HWB 589 My Shepherd will supply my need (OL #VT640)
HWB 578 The Lord's My Shepherd – public domain

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the [valley of the shadow of death],

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

[forever].

John 10:11-18: “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.”

Luke 15:1-7: Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.



About three years ago, I had the chance to visit a sheep farm near Clavet, when Harry and Kathe Harder hosted a small gathering of MC Sask pastors. For a city slicker like me, this was a big deal! While most of the others were content with a glance at

the sheep from the living room window, I asked to go out and see them up close, and even to hold one of the little lambs in my arms just long enough to snap this picture of me looking thrilled and the gangly lamb struggling a bit to get free. Of course, if you know the meaning of the term pastor, you’ll know it comes from the Latin for “shepherd,” so this whole experience involved a bit of a play on words!

For most people in biblical times – and maybe for many of you with stronger rural connections than I – livestock, especially sheep, would not have been a novelty. Sheep are mentioned so frequently in the Bible precisely because they were such familiar animals. Much of the poetry and stories of our Bible drew from the everyday life of its agrarian context. So when God is called our divine Shepherd or Jesus tells a parable about a lost sheep, people would immediately have been able to connect with the story

and imagery. And it turns out that reference to shepherds and sheep occurs 500 times in the Bible!

Once you start looking for it, it really is everywhere in the Bible. Many of the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs involve shepherds and sheep: Moses and meets Zipporah, whom he will marry, when she is tending her family's sheep (Exodus 2). Same with Rachel, who is identified as a shepherd when she meets Jacob at the well (Genesis 29). (Notice that women were shepherds in that time, too!).¹ Later, during the time of Israelite royalty, David is an unexpected choice for king because he is just a shepherd boy. In I Samuel 16, when the prophet Samuel comes to anoint the new king, David's family doesn't even include him but leave him to watch the sheep in the fields, since they assume he couldn't possibly be God's choice for king. And of course, in the Nativity in Luke, the shepherds visit the stable to see the newborn Jesus lying in the manger.

In our Scripture passages for today, the language of Shepherd is used for God, and this is a very familiar image. Psalm 23 offers timeless words of comfort as God leads us "sheep" in green pastures and still waters, tending to our needs and restoring our souls. Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that to speak of God as our Shepherd emphasizes above all that God "leads and feeds" us – that is, that God relates to us with "tenderness, gentleness, and attentiveness," which are also maternal qualities.² So this is a caring and compassionate God, who comforts us and lovingly provides for our needs.

¹ Beulah Wood, "The Way of a Shepherd," *CBE International*, June 5, 2007,

<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/way-shepherd>

² Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 204.

I find it fascinating that somewhere along the way – perhaps because of David’s first career as a shepherd – these qualities come to be associated with kingship and good governance, to the point that Brueggemann can speak of “the shepherd-kings of the Davidic dynasty.”³ Two things that formerly were seen as opposites – lowly shepherds and mighty kings – become combined here. African-American, Anabaptist theologian Drew Hart points out just how jarring it would have been in Jesus’ time and place for shepherds to be the first visitors to the newborn Messiah. He writes that even among the Israelites who were occupied by Rome, shepherds, “among their own people, were further stigmatized and unwanted, seen as misfits and left living on the margins of society. They lived on the underside of the underside. What God would make an arrival with people at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as if they were the preferred crowd?”⁴ This is why David’s beginnings make him the ultimate underdog, such an unexpected candidate for king.

Yet the Israelite king is a shepherd-king, the way that God is our Divine Shepherd: “a wise, caring, attentive agent who watches over, guards, feeds, and protects a flock that is vulnerable, exposed, dependent, and in need of such help.”⁵ The problem was, of course, that many of the kings were simply bad shepherds, who neglected and even exploited their sheep! When Israel is defeated by Babylon and taken into exile, these circumstances are blamed on the “irresponsible” shepherd-kings, who allowed their sheep to be “scattered.”⁶ It is during one of these times of scattering – of occupation and exploitation by the Roman Empire and the corrupt Temple system –

³ Brueggemann, 260.

⁴ Drew Hart, *Trouble I’ve Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2016), 60.

⁵ Brueggemann, 259-260.

⁶ Brueggemann, 260.

that Jesus makes his claim to be the Good Shepherd, come to gather up the sheep without a shepherd.

Our two New Testament passages tell us important things about the meaning of good shepherding, according to Jesus. Firstly, they tell us something valuable about power. The Good Shepherd, says Jesus, lays down their life for the sheep, protecting them from danger. By contrast, “The 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. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:12-15). In Jesus’ context of suffering under Roman occupation, this was a stern word for the religious and political leaders of his people, who were doing little to protect the most vulnerable from violence and exploitation – and in some cases, were profiting from it themselves! Rather than this kind of selfish, dominating, callous leadership Jesus is here advocating what’s often called servant-leadership – leadership that serves the needs of the people, that’s done out of care for them, that is concerned with their well-being, the way that a loving shepherd cares for their sheep. In more contemporary terms, we might connect this to questions of how we use the power and privilege we have in our leadership, teaching, nurturing, care-giving, or other roles. Do we use our power only to get ahead ourselves? Or are we looking for ways to build others up as well, maybe even advocate for the needs of others, whether or not we share those needs?

Secondly, Jesus' parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15) takes us one step further in the upside-down values of the reign of God. Jesus tells this parable in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, who are frankly disgusted with the company that Jesus is keeping – primarily tax collectors and prostitutes and people who would have been considered “sinners,” even “unclean” according to Temple purity laws. But Jesus tells this story about a shepherd who has 100 sheep and leaves behind 99 of them for the sake of finding one that is lost. I love Archbishop Desmond Tutu's retelling of the story because he highlights the gritty details that the Bible leaves out – that this was a stinky, muddy sheep, but that the shepherd put it on his shoulders anyway! And the shepherd's reaction to finding the one lost sheep is rejoicing, leading to an invitation to the whole neighbourhood to rejoice with them at the one lost sheep who was found. Here too, Jesus points to a priority for those on the margins, to the last being first in God's reign, to the example of a shepherd who takes the risk of intentionally seeking out the lost and rejoices at their finding their way home.

Of course, that's not to say that the sheep won't get lost again. There's a funny video of a sheep that has fallen down a narrow crevice and is really stuck. We see the shepherd just pulling this sheep out by the leg, and finally, the sheep is free. It's so excited that it frolics and kicks up its hind legs and jumps and ends up ... right back in the ditch, a little further down! That's human nature sometimes. We don't always stop at making the same mistake just once. But we know the shepherd will go pull the sheep back out of the ditch again.

These days, I've heard some of us express discouragement and tiredness. It's been a very long year, and we are facing a third wave of Covid-19. Vaccinations are

underway, but some of us are still waiting for our turn. We are missing loved ones who live out of province. We are grieving another loss of someone dear to us who belonged to this community without the comfort of gathering as a whole community to remember him. We would like nothing more than for this pandemic to be over, but it isn't yet. When we are hurting like this it's important to be gentle with ourselves and others. I read somewhere that when moving forward seems too difficult, maybe we can at least not go backward. Sometimes staying in one place is an achievement, is something worth rejoicing over. And we know that even through this wilderness, God, our Good Shepherd goes with us, tending to us with care, giving us comfort and rest for the journey. AMEN