

“The Lord is My Shepherd”
Psalm 23
Sunday, April 17, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

There is a 2,000-year-old story that may or may not be apocryphal. It took place when much of the world was unknown and largely unmapped. Cartographers had to have some way of portraying those areas of the earth that were as yet unexplored, so they symbolized these regions by dragons, monsters, and large fish. The message was clear. Uncharted territories were frightening, fearsome places. Terrors lay buried there.

But as many maps declared, “There be treasures” as well. Here’s the story: One commander of a battalion of Roman soldiers was caught up in a battle that took him into the territory that the mapmakers had represented with their monsters and dragons. Not knowing whether to forge ahead into the unknown, or turn back into the known, which would also be a retreat, he dispatched a messenger to Rome with this urgent request: “Please send new orders. We have marched off the map.” (from David E. Leininger)

Ever feel like that? Like you’ve marched off the map of the known world? Like you’re wandering in a place where GPS devices are of no help to you? Caught in an off-the-grid place of confusion, not knowing which way to go?

In times like that, we need help. We need a navigator, a co-pilot. We need an old and trusted friend.

Psalm 23 tells of just such a friend. “The Lord is my shepherd....” This is one of the best-known passages of scripture. Many of us memorized it – in the King James Version, no less! – in Sunday School, or on the knee of a parent or grandparent. We hear it at funerals and at

the end of life. Psalm 23 reminds us that God protects us when we go “off the grid” of the known territory of our lives.

I. The Shepherd.

“The Lord is my shepherd...”

In ancient biblical times, kings are seen as shepherds. Kings lead their people like a flock of sheep. Shepherd kings rule over their flocks.

To call God our shepherd is to use a political term. We claim God as our king; our allegiance is to him. No human being has absolute authority over us; only God.

One scholar – his name is Shepherd!... J. Barrie Shepherd! – he shares this experience of God as shepherd and king:

“Several Novembers ago I found myself, just before midnight, in the deep silence of London's Westminster Abbey. I had been attending a dinner in the Jerusalem Chamber adjoining the Abbey, the room where Henry IV was taken to die, and where our Westminster Confession was born. As the evening wore on I slipped from the table and entering by a narrow doorway found myself alone in that soaring nave, the tallest nave in all of Europe. All around me were the emblems of mortality, the tombs of the great and the good, poets and generals, statesmen, explorers, inventors, healers, reformers, with their fascinating inscriptions, their glowing tributes.

“I walked the length of that long aisle, along which kings and queens had made their way to coronation, to marriage, to interment. I stood a while before the great high altar. And it seemed to me that all that I had seen there, yes the deaths and lives, the achievement and insight, sheer courage, true faith, that all of this was brought together here, embraced and lifted up to God, lifted up in one great hymn of thanks and praise and glory. And I saw that that's what we are called to do.”

God is our Shepherd King. No one else. He is the shepherd over you and me, and he is shepherd over the most powerful people in the world.

The main job of a Shepherd King is to provide for his people. The Shepherd King provides food: “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” The Shepherd King provides water: “he leads me beside still waters.” The Shepherd King provides protection: “God keeps me alive,” or “restores my soul.”

How does God do this?

II. The Path.

“He leads me in right paths.”

The “right paths” are God’s protection. “God keeps me alive;” “he restores my soul” by leading me in the right paths. “The right path is the path that leads to abundant life” (David M. Burns).

Theologian Marva Dawn writes about getting caught in a rut on her bicycle one day as she rode down a dirt path. She tried to avoid the rut, but kept getting caught in it. Finally, she gave in and just allowed her bicycle to glide along in the rut. It was the most peaceful and enjoyable part of the ride. She could relax, take in the scenery, gain speed with little effort. “The rut became a track – a track of righteousness – a path that led to green pastures and still waters.” (David M. Burns)

Of course, not all ruts are healthy; but if we get in a rut, a habit, a pattern of Christian practice...if we find ourselves on a right path, led by God...that path, or rut, leads us to spiritual food and water. What does that rut look like? We can all name behaviors that contribute to a right walk with God, can’t we? Go to church. Read the Bible. Pray. Fellowship with other Christians. Give tithes and offerings. Be of service. Our membership vows provide us with a

good navigation list: support the church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service. If you do these things, you will be on the right path. You will be in a righteous rut, you will be on a track of righteousness. God provides a path for us, as a guide to where all the good food and water is. God provides a path as a protection from wrong ways, destructive tracks, ruts that lead to disaster.

Of course, sometimes the Shepherd takes us through “the darkest valley.” It may be shocking and painful to discover that the Shepherd’s path has led us to a low, dark place. But the psalmist is not at all surprised by this fact.

III. The Valley.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.”

In verse 4, at the exact center of the Psalm, this phrase appears: “you are with me.” This is the central theological claim of the psalm. The core spiritual truth of Psalm 23 is: “you are with me.”

Keith Wagner tells a wonderful circus story that shows how God is with us, even in the darkest valley:

“One night at a circus the tent was packed with thousands of people. It was time for the tiger trainer to come out and perform. He bowed to the audience then went inside the cage. A hush drifted over the audience as the door was locked behind him. The trainer skillfully put the tigers through their paces. Suddenly there was a huge pop, followed by a complete blackout of power. For several long minutes the trainer was trapped in the cage with the tigers in total darkness. The trainer knew the tigers could see him with their powerful vision, but he could not see them. All he had was a whip and small chair as a means of protection.

“Finally, the lights came back on, and the trainer finished his performance. Everyone

was amazed that he wasn't attacked and feared for him in the darkness. After his performance the trainer was interviewed by a local television reporter. He admitted how scared he was. But during the blackout he realized that the tigers did not know that he could not see them. He just kept cracking his whip and talked to them until the lights came back on.

“There are times when all of us are confronted with tigers in the dark. We don't trust the oil companies because of escalating gas prices. It is getting more difficult to trust government officials because of all the perks and golf trips congressmen receive from lobbyists. Some don't trust the Church. But trust is also a problem in relationships. Some don't trust their spouses. Others don't trust their children.

“Like the trainer in the cage with no power, we live in the darkness, afraid that we will be attacked, hurt, rejected, abused or taken advantage of. Just as the trainer had to trust that he could survive the darkness while engaged with the tigers, God wants us to trust Him, when we are overcome with darkness and fear.”

Towards the end of Psalm 23, the psalmist describes God as a gracious host. Again, God is with us. God provides. God provides food: “You prepare a table before me.” God provides drink: “my cup overflows.” God provides protection: “you anoint my head with oil,” even “in the presence of my enemies.”

“Surely goodness and steadfast love will pursue me all the days of my life.”

Usually in the psalms, enemies are pursuing the psalmist. In Psalm 23, enemies are present, “but the real ‘threat’ is God's goodness and unfailing love!... It is crucial that the psalmist ends up in God's ‘house,’ a place where others are...present, even the enemies... the psalmist takes his or her place in the household of God, in communion with God and in solidarity with all God's people.” (J. Clinton McCann Jr.). In other words, we do not escape “the darkest

valley” alone.

Closing

Mickey Anders shares about a group of tourists who saw a legless war veteran go to the Shrine of Lourdes:

“...they whispered and laughed, ‘Does he suppose God will give him back his legs?’ The veteran overheard this remark. Turning to the group, he said, ‘No, I don't expect God to give me back my legs. I expect him to show me how to live without them.’

“Perhaps if we just asked the right questions, we would discover that God is not in the business of bringing pain and suffering into our lives. Rather God gives strength to live even in the midst of the worst kinds of suffering.”

“I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

God gives us strength to live, “even in the midst of the worst kinds of suffering.” God gives us strength to live our “whole life long,” in times of peace and plenty and in times of threat and loss.

The 23rd Psalm is a resource for all of our daily living, and not only for those “dark valley” times. God is our Shepherd King. He leads us in right paths; He shows us where the good ruts are – the righteous ruts. He is with us in the darkest valleys. His goodness and steadfast love pursue us always, whatever our circumstances.

“The Lord is my shepherd...”

May you lean on Him always.

Amen.