

“There’s the Rub”

Last Weekend after Pentecost – November 25/26, 2006

Sermon Background Study

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.

John 10:7-15 (NRSV)

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

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.

Who will we follow? Who takes care of us? Who protects us from the wolves? Our shepherd. Our good and noble and worthy shepherd, who has laid down his life for our sake.

The Bible has sometimes been described as a beautiful mosaic. Each piece, each small section, is wondrous and stirring on its own, but the true depth and brilliance of the mosaic can be appreciated only after stepping back and taking in the whole.

Similarly, Psalm 23 and today’s passage from John can be read and appreciated in and of themselves. Who would not be comforted by the words of the psalmist? Who could not embrace a shepherd who gives abundant life? Yet, the richness of Jesus’ images in John 10 can only be grasped by considering other uses of shepherd imagery in the Bible. Indeed, it would be a good idea to read the two text boxes before going on.

Caring for the sheep

Shepherds care for the sheep. They lead the sheep (v.2 of Psalm 23; 10:3 in John).¹ They provide food (v.1 and 10:9) and protect them (v.4 and 10:12-13). The shepherds do all this so that the sheep will live

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.

The Good Shepherd

When I was in college, I worked a couple of summers in the Wyoming range collecting samples of underground water. There were *lots* of sheep – and they always struck me as a pretty content bunch. I even met a few Basque shepherds who lived in small horse-drawn wagons as they tended to their flocks, caring for the sheep and lambs. They ensured that their flocks lacked nothing – which is what the psalmist means in v.1 of Psalm 23.

The imagery of God as the good shepherd and we as his flock is one of the dominant portraits of God in the Bible.¹ It is not a very complicated or intellectual portrait. God cares – that’s it. He cares for his flock and for each sheep in it. Even in a flock of a hundred sheep, the good shepherd will search high and low for the one who is lost (Matt 18:10-14). God finds for us the green pastures and the still waters. This seems to be a lot harder for us to learn than it is for the sheep. But it is God who strengthens us as we seek to shed our anxieties and find the joy that can be ours.

1. Allen Coppedge helps us to see that Scripture paints several portraits of God, including one of God as the Good Shepherd. In all Coppedge identifies eight portraits of God: Transcendent Creator, Sovereign King, Personal Revealer, Priest, Righteous Judge, Loving Father, Powerful Redeemer, and the Good Shepherd. All are found in the Old and New Testament and all revealed in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Coppedge’s book, *Portraits of God: A Biblical Theology of Holiness* is excellent. It is more of a reference book than it is a read-from-front-to-back book.

¹ In the west, shepherds drive the sheep using sheep dogs for horses, but in the Near East, now as then, shepherds actually lead the flocks, using their voices to call the sheep forward. The shepherds of Jesus’ named every sheep in their flock and called them by name.

(v. 3, 10:10). Of the herd animals, sheep are in particular need of this care for they've lost the ability to defend themselves. Some sheep herders have even taken to mixing llamas into the herds because llamas are tougher and more combative. The llamas will form protective circles in the face of a predator, or at least run away. Sheep do none of that. They are utterly dependent on the shepherd and, to quote Shakespeare, "there's the rub." All this shepherd imagery is wonderfully warm and comforting, but it leads us to what we most want to ignore: *our dependence upon God*.

After all, we're the cowboys, not the sheep. We stand ready to feed ourselves, defend ourselves, and make our own way in the world. We were taught self-reliance. When facing a problem, we pick ourselves up, devise a solution and press on. In the stirring words of Henley's *Invictus*, we are the captains of our fates and the masters of our souls. This is our way. This is the American way.

"I am against the shepherds"

Ezekiel 34 is by far the most important scriptural background for today's passage from the Gospel of John.

Throughout the ancient Near East, including Israel, the shepherd was a metaphor for the kings and their responsibilities to guide, protect, and care for their people. Ezekiel 34 opens with God's indictment of Israel's shepherds:

"Thus says the LORD God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? . . . I am against the shepherds . . . I will rescue my sheep from their mouths . . ."

God will take over the shepherding of God's people:

"I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . ."

And how will God shepherd his people?

"I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them: I the LORD, have spoken."

Since David, son of Jesse and second king of the united Israel, had died centuries before Ezekiel, he cannot be who God has in mind as the servant who will shepherd God's people. Rather, this servant shepherd will come from David's royal line.

Thus, when Jesus says "I am the Good Shepherd," he is not only calling on the imagery of God as the Good Shepherd (see the page one text box) in Psalm 23, but also on the imagery from Ezekiel of the coming prince, the anointed one, the Messiah, who will shepherd the people as the young David once shepherded his flocks of sheep.

Reading Scripture is an art that is always made richer and more rewarding when we can make connections between Scripture passages and see how seemingly isolated stories and passages are influenced by a larger biblical unity. A good study Bible will help you to see these connections, particularly if it has a lot of cross-references.

Yet, we know that in the end our self-reliance will fail us. We can't accumulate enough wealth to forestall sorrow. There is no doctor who can prevent our death. We can't have enough police to stop crime or armies to prevent war. We think we don't need a shepherd when, in truth, we do. We imagine that the wolf is our problem, when it actually the shepherd's.

The Good Shepherd

In the months leading up to the recent election, one of our gubernatorial candidates kept telling me that he wanted to be my good shepherd. I always wanted to shout back at the television, "The job is taken!"

As a good shepherd, Jesus leads his flock into the safety of the pen (10:2). But unlike any other shepherd, Jesus is the very gate to the pen. He and no other is the way into the safety of the pen (v. 9a) and out to the luxurious forage of the pasture (9b). He is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). The world is filled with many who want to steal and to kill and to destroy. But Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, is the bringer of life, abundant life, life that can be given me by no one else.

I'm not sure what counts as an abundant life for sheep. It is probably just getting fat and being safe. But for us, this abundant life - life lived to the full - that Jesus offers us is life at its barely imagined best.

How is this abundant life to be ours? Who can ensure that it will not be snatched away?

Good shepherds are willing to defend their flocks, even putting themselves at some risk. But I doubt that many shepherds have died defending their sheep and even those that did, never intended to die. Yet, as God's anointed shepherd, Jesus does not merely risk his life for his flock, he willingly lays it down for us, saving us because we cannot save ourselves.²

Thus, we can rest in knowing that our Good Shepherd restores our soul and leads us down the right paths.

In him, we shall never want.

²The "for" in "lay down my life for the sheep" emphasizes Jesus' sacrificial death, as this word construction does every time in John's gospel (see 6:51; 11:50; 17:19, and more). It isn't that Jesus' death is an example for his flock. Rather, the sheep are in mortal danger and Jesus intentionally sacrifices himself in their defense, for there is no other way (from Don Carson's commentary on John).

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

November 26 – Dec 2

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Micah 1-3; Psalm 150 Micah was a prophet in the eighth century BC. He was a contemporary of Isaiah and some passages from the two prophets' writing are parallel.</p>	<p>Monday Micah 4-5; Isaiah 40 This chapter of Isaiah opens what we might call "Second Isaiah" (chapters 40-66), written during the time of the Babylonian exile. Try to read it as if you had lost everything.</p>
<p>Tuesday Micah 6-7; Isaiah 41 Micah 6:6-8 is one of my favorite passages. Every time you think that the OT is interested in nothing more than animal sacrifice and rules-following, turn to these verses, written many centuries before Jesus.</p>	<p>Wednesday A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Thursday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Friday 2 Thessalonians; Isaiah 42 The hopeful beauty of Second Isaiah rolls on. See Jesus when you read verses 1-9. This is one of several "servant songs" in these writings.</p>
<p>Saturday Nahum; Isaiah 43 Nahum brings an announcement of the doom that is about to befall Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians, who overran and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722BC. If this book seems unduly vengeful, try reading it alongside Jonah, in which all of Nineveh repents!</p>	

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have Fellowship Groups meeting now and will be adding more this fall. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Books that would make good Christmas gifts

I've been making book recommendations for almost three years. Here are a few that I think would make good Christmas gifts to friends and family. *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore, still has copies of these.

The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible, Ed. Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, et al

Talking the Walk, by Marva Dawn

Prayer, by Philip Yancey

Finding God in the Questions, by Dr. Timothy Johnson

The Jesus I Never Knew, by Philip Yancey

Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision, by Paul Wesley Chilcote

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Who wants to be your good shepherd? There are always lots of folks lobbying for the job. Who tells you that they want to protect and provide for you? To show you the way to the life you've always wanted? You might share some stories of times in your life when a seeming "good shepherd" let you down, when you discovered that the shepherd wasn't as good as you thought or as able.

In what ways do these false shepherds (wolves dressed in shepherd's clothing?) fail us? Why do we find it so easy to invest our trust and our hopes somewhere other than in God? I'm reminded of the time the Israelites demanded a human king, just like all the peoples around them. The prophet Samuel reminded them that God was to be their king, but the Israelites would not relent. Samuel warned them that they better be careful what they wished for, as kings are inclined to thievery, mischief, and worse. But the people wanted a king (a good shepherd!) and so God gave them one. Of course, the shepherds of Israel turned out to be wolves themselves (Ezekiel 34).

The 23rd Psalm is so familiar to us it can be hard for us to read it with fresh hearts. You might try gathering five or six different translations of the psalms (many are available on-line), including Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase. Read through each translation slowly and aloud, breathing slowly, meditatively. Then come back to the translation that most touched your heart. Has the reading and speaking brought you comfort? Peace? Did you hear the psalm in new ways? How can this brief psalm help us to place our heart where it belongs and where it wants to be?