

SERMON- Proper 23 (A)
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Psalm 23

Good Shepherd (Virtual)
October 11, 2020

~~Philippians 4:1-9~~ ————— ~~Matthew 22:1-14~~

OPENING:

Two confessions/ disclaimers to start us off:

First, about a month and a half ago, this Gospel reading appeared in our Noonday prayer as the Scripture for that day. I was the one officiating and I said, at that time, “I am not quite sure what Jesus is trying to say here, but I know that this lesson is coming up on the Sunday schedule and I will have to preach on it then.”

Now here we are, and I am going to back out on that promise and preach instead on the 23rd Psalm which so helpfully provides an escape. My reasons are that ‘We are the Church of the Good Shepherd’ and that we are living through such different times that we desperately need its healing words.

Now Psalm 23 is famous to the point of being overly familiar, but I think we still do need to hear it.

Case in point: are you ever surprised when the video camera cuts into a sports huddle in a key timeout, what the coaches are telling their players?

I am always expecting some grand speech that ignites the team, or some highly detailed play concept. Instead, the coaches usually say thing so obvious and ordinary, like:

“Keep the energy up.” “Rebound.” “Let’s finish hard.”

They concentrate on the fundamentals and so that’s what we are going to do today with Psalm 23.¹

My second confession: last Sunday, we had our first in-person worship service in 7 months, outside on the Grove with the Blessing of the Animals and Holy Eucharist. What a marvelous (and safe) moment of communion and fellowship and worship. My second confession though is that I don’t actually love animals that much. For whatever reason, I did not get that gene.

With those confessions made, I am going to try to concentrate on animals (along with the fundamentals) in the Healing words of the 23rd Psalm.

¹ Todd M. Donatelli. “Homiletical Perspective” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2009. *Feasting on the Word* (Year B, Volume 3) Louisville: Westminster Knox, 249.

SHEEP:

Let's start with sheep, the most prominent animal in Psalm 23.

The Psalmist uses language comparing God to the faithful and loving shepherd.

That means that we are the sheep.

Sheep (at least in the imagination) are fluffy and cute and snowy white but this is not supposed to be a flattering comparison.

In reality, and I only know this second hand, remember my disclaimer about not loving animals, sheep are smelly, unintelligent, weak, shy, vulnerable, etc.

Being referring to as a "sheep" in modern speech means being a follower, incapable of thinking for oneself, suffering from herd mentality.

No one wants to be a sheep. Sheep are what we think of when we try to go to sleep, the blandest thing possible to calm our anxieties.

But... Martin Luther preached on Psalm 23 by saying that *all... that we... are asked... to be... by God..... is sheep.*

Not a glorious eagle, or a fearsome lion, or some other more noble animal.

Instead, we are called to be sheep who have:

"... no pressure to be better, more inventive, productive, strong, or independent. All we are asked to do is listen to the voice of the shepherd."²

What an easy job description, just laze around in the field, just waddling along, waiting until the next meal.

Our culture tells us different, and we confuse that with God's voice or the Church's, saying you must do more, be more, consume more.

But the first animal lesson of the 23rd Psalm is the opposite:

you are enough, you are beautiful in your sheepishness, just open your ears for the Shepherd's call and follow his commands.

² Edwin Chr. Van Driel "Theological Perspective" 2009. in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2009. *Feasting on the Word* (Year B, Volume 3) Louisville: Westminster Knox, 250

WOLVES:

The next animal featured, not by name, but definitely in the background of the Psalm, is the wolf—or any other wild animal that might threaten and endanger the sheep.

To consider the wolf, we have to return to the fundamentals and not get ahead for ourselves.

We want to jump ahead and think of the “valley of the shadow of death” as a metaphor for death, or for some larger evil or abstract future problem.

The Psalm’s long interpretive history pushes us ahead in that direction, but a more literal reading keeps the Psalm in the context of life in *this* world.

It puts the Psalm back in the field, and back to the wolves.

The Psalmist know that sheep cannot survive on their own or fend for themselves.

The fact that there are dangerous predators looming is simply an accepted part of the sheep’s life.

They don’t sit there wondering why wolves exist, or why bad wolves happen to good people.

Psalm 23 is *uninterested* in trying to deny the existence of the scary wolf, or say that wolves don’t eat good sheep.

Rather, the Psalmist knows that evil exists, and is willing to name it.

Evil exists in this world, sheep live in that same world, God the faithful Shepherd, will be with us throughout.

Harold Kushner, the famous author and Rabbi, calls that line from Psalm 23: “I will fear no evil, for you are with me” as “the Bible’s clearest and most succinct response to the question of why bad things happen to good people.

God does not explain; God comforts.”³

³ Kushner, Harold S. 2003. ‘*The Lord is My Shepherd*’: *the Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-third Psalm*. New York: Knopf, 110.

HOUND:

That brings us to our final animal: the HOUND.

Now, you might ask, where is the beagle, the basset, the grey- or foxhound in Psalm 23? Well, you start with the fundamentals, but the genius of the Psalm is its ability to transcend that 1st century world of animal and wildlife and speak to the concerns of humanity across space and time. Let me explain:

At the end of the Psalm, it is declared triumphantly that “goodness and mercy shall *follow me* all the days of my life.”⁴

The phrase “follows me” also can be translated as “pursues/ chases me.”

So, God “hounds you” like a hunting dog in pursuit.

That’s a more apt of a description of the life of faith, is it not? God is not merely “following” us, patiently moving from room to room, politely tapping us on the shoulder, at least not usually.

Rather God is ‘on to us’, God is showing up, busting in, yipping at our heels.

The image I like is that of sheep dog, slobbering its love continuously, even when we don’t want it.

That type of image was on the mind of the poet Francis Simpson when he wrote his famous poem “Hound of Heaven” about how God pursues us, not always with a “still small voice” but sometimes unrelentingly, forcefully and even combatively. Another image is provided by the author of *The Gospel According to Peanuts* who included a chapter entitled the “Hound of Heaven” about the character Snoopy, who Charles Schulz intended as a “little Christ” of the comic strip

CONCLUSION:

Someone once said that poetry/ metaphor are like rubber bands that stretch their original or literal meaning. A brilliant metaphor can stretch far and wide, like Psalm 23, but you always risk snapping the rubber band. Maybe Snoopy did it for me this time. . . . That’s when you go back to the fundamentals.

When I watch other people love their animals, even smelly/gross/ less than brilliant animals like sheep, or the beautiful pets brought here last week, I think about Psalm 23. It’s sacramental, it’s a visible reminder of God’s love for us, expressed via one’s love for the animals. I might not fully understand it, but in the words of the Psalmist: “it revives my soul, and leads me besides still water and guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake.” **AMEN**

⁴ Psalm 23.6