

The Rev. Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
4th Sunday of Easter/Year C
April 25th, 2010
Text: Psalm 23

The Lord is my Shepherd

The Twenty-Third Psalm is undoubtedly one of the best known passages in the Bible. Of the 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms it is the most utilized. Many of us learned it in our early years especially the King James Version:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul;
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Like many churches, we have a poster of a smiling Jesus standing on a well kept lawn tending his sheep. It is a familiar image that reminds the young as well as the more “mature in age” that Jesus cares for all of God’s creation; the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the animals who inhabit the land, and we human beings. This is the Jesus that comforts a waking child late at night when all is quiet and dark. This is the same Jesus who comforts a fretting adult who does not know how bills will be paid.

One preacher has deemed this psalm “the comfort food of Scripture” and perhaps rightly so. It is the Twenty-Third Psalm that most will turn to in times of serious illness and grief. I cannot count the times when as I served as an on-call chaplain at Barnes-Jewish Hospital that this psalm was read near the bedside of a critically ill patient or in the viewing room where the recently deceased were laid. Rarely were these words read alone because

family and loved ones, even nurses and hospice workers chimed in-these words etched in their hearts and minds. Most recently a group us who kept vigil with our sister, Lynn Siegel also prayed these words of comfort not only for Lynn's sake but for our own as we remembered the promise of eternal life by our loving God. The promise of life everlasting echoes particularly in the words of the 6th verse: "Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever*"-makes this psalm of trust a standard part of scripture in a majority of services for those who have died.

Illness and death are not the only times when we pray for our God to be near us and comfort us. And not only us but the world in which we live: where bullies trouble others enough that the only relief is suicide; where natural disasters seem to cause destruction and chaos more often of late; where senseless acts of violence is the only way some seem to use to get their point across.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, John's Gospel gives us yet another image of shepherd as we listened to Jesus' answer those gathered around him in the temple. 'Who are you?' "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Instead of giving them a plain, simple answer he speaks of sheep! "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

When Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth he was indeed the Good Shepherd-gathering saints and sinners alike to himself, feeding them, healing them, treating them with compassion. He gathered those on the margins of society, those ostracized by their communities. The God in Christ in whom we believe continues to be *our* Good Shepherd who gathers and leads *us* from our old ways toward new life in him.

There is a story about a Sunday school teacher who asked her group of children if any of them could quote the entire 23rd Psalm. A little girl, about four years old, raised her hand along with the other children. A bit skeptical, the teacher asked if she could really quote the entire psalm. The little girl came up to the podium, faced the class, made a little bow, and said: "The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I want." She then bowed again and sat down. She may have overlooked a few verses but she captured the psalmist's heart. To say with the psalmist, "I shall not be in want," challenges all that we know as a society.

You see, we live in an era where we are lured into thinking bigger is better and we cannot do without certain products. We are not “with it” if we do not wear a certain brand of clothing or if we do not drive a certain kind of car. We live in an age of competitiveness in which we just have to keep up with the Joneses. We are led to believe that we must be classier and faster and maybe even look a certain way, be a certain size. We not only try to dress for success but we dress to impress, buy to impress, dig deeper into debt to impress. One of my classmates used to call this the “instant gratification, I’m going to sue you first, you snooze-you lose, I got mine now you get yours syndrome” that is so prevalent these days. It is not easy to resist all the voices that seem to dull the awareness of God’s presence in the world.

But in the *here and now*, God provides for all our needs. God continues to invite us to be in relationship and to place ourselves in God’s restful and steady embrace. God continues to lead us and guide us. Even in our darkest days, in our most anxious moments God is with us, protecting us from all harm. We are never alone. No matter what might happen there is no need to fear for God’s love is overflowing. God gathers us together at God’s Table to share in God’s abundant blessings and God’s gifts of bread and wine. God’s goodness and mercy enfolds us and we hold to God’s promise of life with God that will never ever end.

The Shepherd, the Risen Christ calls us, each and every one of us... “He (God) knows the name you have, the street that you live on, the place where you work, and that which is around you-your friends by your side, the dreams in your soul, the disappointments in your life, the aspirations in your heart, the possibilities in your destiny.”* He knows our wants as well as our needs.

Do *you* hear his voice?

*taken from Henry C. Gregory III-“The Shepherd”