

### **Psalm 23**

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff - they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely 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.

### **John 10:22-30**

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

## Sermon

Psalm 23 is probably the most beloved readings in the Psalms if not the entire Bible. For many of us, it was one of the first scripture passages that we memorized, that we learned as a young person. Line by line, verse by verse, the words of the psalmist moved off of the pages and into our memories and then, somewhere along the line the words moved from our minds to our hearts. In times where we are seeking comfort, seeking hope, seeking the familiar words that remind us of God's steadfast love - the 23rd Psalm has been readily available. I can't tell you the number of times I have sat in the hospital and recited the words of the psalm with the person I was visiting.

What is it about naming the Lord as our shepherd that brings us hope? What is it about the rod and staff that give us comfort? I think it begins with what Jesus shared with those who were asking him if he was the messiah. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." Have you ever watched a shepherd in action? I watched a recent video where visitors came to see the sheep at a farm and the shepherd invited the visitors to try their hand at calling to the sheep. He told them the words that he used and invited them each to call out to the sheep and see what would happen. Each of the three visitors tried their best to call out to the sheep "Ti-Ka, Ti-Ka, Ti-Ka" they called. But each time the sheep continued, heads down, munching on grass. Then the shepherd called out, "Ti-Ka... Ti-Ka, Ti-Ka, Ti-Ka." Within seconds the sheep stopped eating grass, looked up, and then began trotting toward the shepherd. The sheep knew the voice of the shepherd, and they followed him.

And Christ's voice is familiar to us as well. Though we do not hear God's voice through vocal chords, we still find God's words familiar, in passages like the 23rd Psalm that we know by heart, and familiar stories of mustard seeds, fishing boats, burning bushes, and tongues of fire. We also know Christ's voice that calls out in the rising sun, sings praise in the budding flowers, and whispers a prayer with the fluttering wings of a butterfly. We hear God's familiar voice in the sound of children, the welcome of family back home, and the unexpected phone call from a friend. Even the silent, steady presence of a loved one who is always there, doing the little things, the everyday things that makes life more enjoyable. The sheep know the voice of the shepherd, because the shepherd is constantly present.

Presence is so important to trust, but I think there is a second important factor that comes with knowing the good Shepherd, and that is that the shepherd is the one who gives us good food to eat. A colleague of mine shared a story about her husband's family who raised sheep. Her in father-in-law shared his secret with her one day. He said, "The sheep come to me because I'm the one who has the apples and minerals that they like so much." The sheep follow the shepherd because he feeds him good food. And we know our Good Shepherd because he feeds us as well, at the table we are fed in the sacrament of bread and cup. In times where we feel surrounded, with enemies on all sides, the Lord prepares a banquet. When we walk in dark valleys, are thirst is quenched by still waters.

Then there is the comfort of the rod and staff. A rod to strike the wild animals and keep the evil at bay. A staff to pull a lost sheep from the side of a cliff or from under the thorny bushes. We give thanks for a shepherd who protects his sheep. But I also wonder if the rod and staff are also used to nudge us along as well. How often has the shepherd bumped our backsides to try and get us to go in a new direction? How often have we fought against the direction of the shepherd?

Another colleague shared a sad story of a new mother ewe who was so protective of her new born lamb that she smothered her. And she expressed how haggard the shepherd seeing the new mother working to rouse her lamb. And I'm reminded about how tricky love can be. Love wants to protect our loved ones, to keep them safe and close, and to have them walk the right paths. But the shepherd's love also knows not to smother the lambs. God gives us freedoms to choose, to fail, to venture into the dark valleys. Out of love, God doesn't control our everyday life - pulling strings as if we are marinated in a play. But when we walk into dark valleys, facing death and sin and evil, the Good Shepherd walks with us as well.

Now there is only one Good Shepherd, no one can take Christ's place. But Jesus also calls the church to be the Body of Christ in the world. And so we not only look for the guidance of the Shepherd's staff, but we are also called to be on the Shepherd's Staff. And like the Good Shepherd, we are called to share with our neighbors by being present, by talking and listening, by giving them good nourishment, by protecting and yet loving our neighbors enough to allow them to make their own choices, but, coming back to the beginning, to walk with them even in the dark valleys. We have a Good Shepherd to guide us in our lives, and we are called to be a member of the Shepherd's Staff. Thanks be to God for sending a shepherd who shows us what Good really is.