

"Jesus As The Good Shepherd"

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Psalm 23 & John 10:1-10

April 13, 2008

Over the past 5 years or so I have had the honor of being asked by Pastor Tim to fill his pulpit when he was gone, as have others in this faith community. I generally follow the lectionary so that I would stay in rhythm with what Tim would be preaching. I seemed to always be asked to preach on the Sundays that had really difficult passages to deal with. For example: the story of Abraham trying to sacrifice his son Isaac or one of the stories dealing with Sodom and Gomorrah. I was just about to conclude that Tim plans his absences around these lectionary readings. That is until today's lesson. Finally Tim has asked me to speak on a Sunday where the topic is dealing with something that I'm personally familiar with, that of sheep herding!

Seriously, though, the first reading that we have heard today is one of the most read and recited readings within the Christian Church. The other would be what we have come to call The Lord's Prayer. The 23rd Psalm is used most widely today as a reading to console us in times of deep grief, particularly as part of a memorial service. This Psalm is so familiar to many of us that when we hear of some horrific event happening, such as the day the World Trade Center was attacked by terrorist, somewhere within the flood of emotions, this psalm automatically comes to our consciousness. This last summer when the small Kansas community named Greensburg was blown off the face of the map, this was one of the Bible readings that I have grown up with as a Christian to give me comfort in dealing with disaster, as well as a way of prayerfully supporting those people who were immediately affected by that F-5 tornado.

I suspect one of the reasons that the 23rd Psalm is so popular with Christians and non-Christians alike comes from the content dealing both with good times and with hard times. Phrases like: He makes me to lie down in green pastures; You prepare a table before me...; My cup runs over, are all images of comfort, safety and well being. The very first line, "The Lord is my shepherd", provides that image of someone who is our protector, who is our provider. I also think this Psalm evokes memories that we have of a simpler time in our life.

Over this last year, many of us have been touched by the death of a loved one. It was almost 6 months ago that I found myself walking through some very difficult waters with the loss of a very dear person in my life **{Yea, though I walk through the**

valley of the shadow of death} and at that same time I also meet Paul who has been proving to be one of the greatest joys in my life. One of the joys that I have been experiencing with Paul comes in our conversations about our childhoods. Even though Paul grew up in the Pacific Northwest and I grew up on the plains of Kansas, we seem to have experienced many of the same things in our formative years.

One would not think that Klamath Falls, OR and Kingman, KS would have much in common in terms of weather patterns, temperatures and landscapes, but it does hold similarities that allows the two of us to reminisce like two old men in front of the small town barber shop. Last weekend, we were eating out and I got to talking about what it was like to walk down the sidewalks in Kingman as a child. How in the heat of the day, I would go and play in the local city swimming pool or go to the river and play in the warm running water **{He leads me beside the still waters}**. Of almost not being able to breath because at the height of the day, the humidity almost matched that of the temperature. How I loved walking down the street that my grandmother lived on as a way to escape the damaging ultra violet sunrays because the whole street was enclosed with a canopy of trees that also seemed to cool the air at the hottest point of the day**{He makes me to lie down in green pastures}**. Of how at early evening one could hear the rustling sounds made by the cicadas and by dark the sounds of the crickets chirping and the frogs crocking and the sight of the lightening bugs as they went about doing what ever lightening bugs do**{He restores my soul}**. In that remembering and telling of those memories I could almost smell and taste those early experiences in growing up in that small mid-western town **{Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life}**. This is how the 23rd Psalm affect's those who hear it. It can bring back memories that provide the sense of security, of comfort, of joy.

At the beginning of the lesson, I joked about my having experience in herding sheep. But it's true! A part of my childhood was experienced on farms. When I was in 5th grade my family moved out of town onto a small farm and part of my first venture in the world of business was in raising sheep. This is one reason why I really enjoy today's scripture texts. I have had first hand experience of the nature of a sheep. Both the Psalm and the New Testament reading out of the Gospel of John today are dealing with sheep and their shepherd.

In the 23rd Psalm the language uses lots of "He's" in it, "He makes me; He leads me; He restores; for His names sake." These seem to present God in a very masculine, male type image, yet if you examine more closely what is being said, you will see that the actions of the shepherd abound in the type of nurturing that we tend to attribute to that of mothers. That is one reason for the composition by Bobby McFerrin in his version of the 23rd Psalm where the reference to the shepherd is that of "She".

Lets shift gears just a little and look to the Ten Chapter of the Gospel of John. Here we see Jesus declaring himself as the shepherd. In the 23rd Psalm, there is no doubt that the shepherd was God. So in this reading we see Jesus declaring himself at the very least God's ambassador and calling the religious establishment, specifically the Pharisees nothing less than thieves. The Rev Peter Gomes, a professor at Harvard University and also minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard in his book, "**The Scandalous gospel of Jesus**", throughout reminds the reader of how conditioned we in the church have become to think of the teachings of Jesus as typical and something that most people would be willing to listen to with ease and comfort. This comes from 2,000 years of the church teaching on these lessons. But in reality, what Jesus had to say was not only revolutionary and raw to those who first heard him speak, but that his teachings were Scandalous to those who thought they had the answers of how to live a prosperous and rewarding life in the site of God.

I would like to share an excerpt out of the movie "The Gospel of John" that deals with the text that we are studying this morning.

I had originally titled today's lesson "Jesus As Your Auntie Mame" but was advised that it may be too much of a stretch for some people to think of Jesus in that light, so the title was altered to "Jesus As the Good Shepherd". One of the reasons why I had thought of Auntie Mame didn't come from the famous line in the movie, "the world is a banquet and most people are starving to death", rather it came from my thinking about **just who is a shepherd** and what does both the 23rd Psalm and John 10 have to say about **what the shepherd provides?** Conversely the question also needs to be asked, who is the thief and what does the thief provide?

In the 23rd Psalm I have already indicated the God is referred to as the Shepherd. In John 10, Jesus states that he is the shepherd. Since we think of Jesus as both God and human there doesn't seem to be much of a conflict. But is Jesus the only one who is a shepherd? A shepherd is one who leads, one who nurtures and one who protects. This is the lesson from the 23rd Psalm. Jesus expanded this to also include, one who gives life and gives it more abundantly.

Outside of God and Jesus as being shepherd's, we often assign to ministers these same attributes. The word Pastor carries with it that idea of shepherding his or her flock; those who are under the Pastor's care. I would suggest that there are many other people who are shepherds. Those of you who are parents are shepherds. Those who work in health care or in hospice are shepherds. Mick as our minister of music and the choir are shepherds to this congregation just as Pastor Tim is. You as members of this church are shepherds to the larger community of Seattle and surrounding communities, even though you may not realize it.

How can this be, you may ask. It is so when we call ourselves Disciples of Christ and work at living out his teachings of love, mercy and grace. It is when we live in the consciousness that life is a gift of God and that this gift is to be shared with others. I don't mean just the physical aspect that we are born and we breath, but life in the interacting between one another and with the world that we have been entrusted to care for and the development of our relationship with God. Jesus say's, "**I have come that you may have life and that you may have it more abundantly.**" He wasn't speaking about financial prosperity. He was speaking about "personal growth", a few decades ago the buzz word was "self-actualization". Today I would call it "holistic living", we may even refer to it as "living green." It is the growth of your spirit and the richness that comes with its expansion.

The thief comes to steal. What does he steal? He stills your life. How does that happen? The thief will **restrain your growth**; the thief **will enslave**, usually achieved by rules –you must do this, you must not do that; the thief **will kill**, by attacking your self image which is a piece of your inner person, your soul. Over the last month our Denomination has come under scrutiny by the IRS and one of our sister churches and its former pastor have come under attack by persons who have no other purpose but to do damage and lesson the integrity of a community of faith. That my friends is an example of a "thief." Instead of bowing to these attacks, we have addressed them publically in the form of an "**Ad**" stating our mission and ministry. For we believe that God is not silent but that **God is Still Speaking!**

I would like to close with a story that I received last week that says in another way, what I have spent 20 minutes speaking on. It's titled, "Chocolate Sings"

"One day I had a date for lunch with friends. Mae, a little old 'blue hair' about 80 years old, came along with them—All in all, a pleasant bunch. When the menus were presented, we ordered salads, sandwiches, and soups, except for Mae who said, "Ice cream, please. Two scoops, chocolate."

I wasn't sure my ears heard right, and the others were aghast. "Along with heated apple pie," Mae added, completely unabashed. We tried to ac quite nonchalant, as if people did this all the time. But when our orders were brought out, I didn't enjoy mine...I couldn't take my eyes off Mae as her pie a-la-mode went down. The other ladies showed dismay. They ate their lunches silently and frowned.

*The next time I went out to eat, I called and invited Mae. I lunched on white meat tuna. She ordered a parfait. I smiled. She asked if she amused me. I answered, "Yes, you do, but also you confuse me. How com you order rich desserts, while I feel I must be sensible?" She laughed and said, with wanton mirth, "**I'm tasting all that's possible.**" "I try to eat the food I need, and do the things I should. But life's so short,*

my friend, I hate missing out on something good. This year I realized how old I was. (She grinned) I haven't been this old before."

"So, before I die, I've got to try those things that for years I had ignored. I haven't smelled all the flowers yet. There are too many books I haven't read. There's more fudge sundaes to wolf down and kites to be flown overhead. There are many malls I haven't shopped. I've not laughed at all the jokes. I've missed a lot of Broadway hits and potato chips and cokes. I want to wade again in water and feel ocean spray on my face. I want to sit in a country church once more and thank God for His grace. I want peanut butter every day spread on my morning toast. I want un-timed long distance calls to the folks I love the most. I haven't cried at all the movies yet, or walked in the morning rain. I need to feel wind in my hair. I want to fall in love again. So, if I choose to have dessert, instead of having dinner, then should I die before night fall, I'd say I died a winner, because I missed out on nothing. I filled my heart's desire. I had that final chocolate mousse before my life expired."

With that, I called the waitress over..."I've changed my mind," I said. "I want what she is having, only add some more whipped cream!"

Jesus may not be Auntie Mame, but he declared that, "He has come to give life and that you may have it more abundantly" God has prepared a table before us, let's not allow ourselves to starve but have life more abundantly and be a shepherd that helps others to share in this banquet that Jesus calls "Life!" Amen.

