

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

Psalms 23

John 10:11-18

April 25, 2021

SHEPHERD QUALITIES

In my sermon last Sunday, I explored how there might be things we could do in order to be modern-day witnesses to resurrection hope in our world where there continues to be great physical suffering. It was after his resurrection from the dead that Jesus showed up to his beleaguered followers and called upon them to be witnesses to the life, love, and hope God reveals and enables. In that sermon, I mentioned stories about a couple of people some would consider to be over-achievers whose actions have made a significant difference in the lives of people who were in need. I hope that those of you who heard it were challenged to think about what it means to be active followers of a risen Lord.

So, if you remember anything I said last Sunday, put it aside for the time being. For we have scripture passages today using shepherd imagery that focus pretty exclusively on what the Lord does, and there is not much call here for us to do much of anything. Psalm 23 starts off with the joyful affirmation: “The Lord is my shepherd.” This is the active One who makes me lie down in green pastures, who leads me beside still waters, who restores my soul, who leads me in right paths, who comforts me, who prepares a table for me, who anoints my head, makes my cup overflow, and follows me with goodness and mercy. Then in John’s Gospel, we hear Jesus say to his followers, “I am the good shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep.” The sheep aren’t asked to do much of anything – the Lord is doing all the heavy lifting here.

“I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says. In the Gospel of John, it is one of the seven times when Jesus uses ‘I am’ language tied to various types of imagery so we can better understand his role as the One who comes to save us. “I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the door of the sheep. I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth, and the life, and I am the true vine,” Jesus tells us. He

doesn't say, "I am the CEO and you are the second-level managers who need to get out there and get busy." He doesn't say, "I am the chief do-gooder and you are my assistant do-gooders." That's in part because if Jesus is the good shepherd, then he, along with the psalmist, implies that we are like sheep. Even though I've never lived on a ranch, I know that we sheep, in addition to not being able to provide for ourselves, are wayward, inept, and defenseless. This is our sovereign Lord, who comes not only to stand beside us, but to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. How ludicrous it would have been for Jesus to say, "I am the good shepherd - you are the sheep. Now get organized and take matters into your own hands or hooves."

Don't get me wrong - there are plenty of places where scripture spells out the challenge for us to live out our love for neighbors in word and deed. You know me – I believe and preach the call for the church to be actively-serving followers of Jesus Christ. But there are times when we need to just rest in the goodness of the divine shepherd's care for us. Lord knows we have needed trustworthy guidance and assurance and sustenance and comfort during this past year. Lord knows it has been confusing and frightening and discouraging at various points along the way. Indeed, the Lord does know how difficult it has been for us. God knows us better than we know ourselves and understands our situation much more fully than do we, which is just part of the reason why the Lord is such a good shepherd for us needy sheep during this challenging time. Sometimes, we need to focus on the qualities of our good shepherd.

It is not just the activity level of the good shepherd that is explored here in John, but also there is clarity about who follows through. The good shepherd is contrasted with those who are just hired hands, who care about their paycheck and their own hide more than they care about the sheep, so they will abandon the flock when the going gets tough. This role that Jesus has as our good shepherd is much more than just a job for him. His practices demonstrate God's desire for rich relationship rather than just ranch retention of livestock. He does more than simply train us or equip us to save ourselves by ourselves. His willingness to lay down his life for us, his sheep, in order to save us shows the depth of God's love for us.

As we go back through the 23rd Psalm, did you notice that we hear the psalmist start out describing the Lord's shepherd-like qualities in the third person? The list of what the Lord does to care for his sheep is extensive. But just after the psalmist describes going through the darkest valley, the psalmist begins to talk directly to the Lord, affirming that you are with me, your rod and your staff comfort me, you prepare a table, you anoint my head. Having made it through that difficult experience of what is termed by the King James translation as the valley of the shadow of death, a shift has occurred in how the psalmist experiences God's presence. After going through the most difficult of situations, there is an increased intimacy in direct relationship with the Lord, where our direct experience of God's care encourages us to talk directly to God, and not just talk about God. After God has walked the walk with us, our God talk is transformed.

When we experience the goodness of this shepherding Lord in our time of need, it changes us. But so we won't misunderstand the specialness of the relationship and think that the intimacy that comes isn't limited to just a me-and-Jesus thing, we hear our Lord as the good shepherd commit to bringing in the other sheep that don't belong to his current fold, whoever those other sheep may be. His flock is not to be defined narrowly. That is among the significant qualities of the good shepherd to whom we belong.

After all of what our Lord does for us as we come to understand it through this shepherd imagery, there is finally something for us as sheep to do in response. We are to be receptive of that good care, we are to heed that good guidance, relish the good sustenance provided. Our confidence in the qualities of our shepherd enables us to put our fears aside. We can be grateful for the trustworthiness of the One who loves and saves us. In this and every time of need, we can rejoice in such things. And how are we to live out that gratitude? That will be a sermon for another day. Today, we joyfully affirm, "The Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want."

