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St. John in the Wilderness
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Psalm 23 and the Good Shepherd

I have spent much time this week reflecting on Psalm 23, saying it over and over again in my head as I go about my days. I have prayed it during bike rides through mountain meadows. I have sung it to children going down to sleep. Still the question persists in my mind: what is it about Psalm 23 that makes it the most appealing psalm -- the most relevant of poetry -- perhaps in all the world and even in all of history.

I was talking to a parishioner recently who mentioned to me that when she wakes in the night and, for one reason or another, sleep evades her, she finds her rest again by saying the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters. He revives my soul. 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." At bedsides and gravesites, on the lips of children and the aged, chanted in synagogues and sung in cathedrals -- Psalm 23 connects with something deep, deep inside of us.

Of course, this is a Psalm of David so we should recall the story of David being chosen as king. The Prophet Samuel was sent by God to anoint the next king of Israel, to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem. He found seven capable sons lined up and ready to rule. They were strong and stood tall, but none of them were who the Lord had in mind. "Are all your sons here?" Samuel asks (1 Sam. 16). "There remains but one," says Jesse, "but he's the youngest, out tending the sheep." And so the shepherd boy became the archetype for Israel's monarchy. The boy who fought warriors with stone and sling would become the shepherd of a nation.

For Christians, many images come to mind when we think of Jesus but I wonder if a shepherd is high on our list. We think of a healer, a judge, a savior, a teacher, a suffering servant, and a king. Today we add another as we sing out, "The King of Love my Shepherd is whose goodness faileth never; I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine for ever." So the image of a shepherd fittingly describes Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem, among the barn animals, with shepherds and sheep at attention. "I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says as he makes a stand against religious leaders who are unwilling to lay down their lives for the sheep they care for not.

Personally, I have always been envious of the preachers who can at least pretend to know something about shepherding for this Sunday. While I would like to have prepared for this

sermon by finding some sheep or some shepherds, I must admit that I have spent little time with either. (I'll tell you what, I will try to get some sheep time in before next year.)

I don't think the first followers of Jesus had this issue, nor those who lived in the first few centuries after Christ, as evidenced by some Christian artwork from the second or third century. You will find in the catacombs of Rome three of the earliest portrayals of Jesus in existence,¹ painted among the tombs, where souls are watched over and tended. If you had never heard Psalm 23, or never encountered this Jesus before who says, "I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep," then you would not be able to interpret these ancient paintings each of which show a figure surrounded by sheep. In some of them he has a rod, a staff, in hand. In one he carries a pot of some kind to nourish the sheep. But in each of these early works of rock art, the Good Shepherd has a sheep not in his arms, but around his shoulders, carrying the lamb securely, confidently, and in strength -- carrying it back to the flock.

You know the Good Shepherd wasn't carrying the lamb who was strongest, or the one who listened the best, or who was without fear. No, this sheep is the one who has gone astray. This shepherd is the one who leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one who is lost, calling out its name -- calling out your name -- to offer pasture and peace and purpose.

I hope that the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one you continue to reflect on this Eastertide. More than that, may we all admit and accept that we need shepherding. Perhaps this is the gift of the 23rd Psalm: saying that the Lord is my shepherd, I'm liberated to be nothing at all except simply one of Christ's sheep, led by the Good Shepherd who lays down and takes up his life for us. In listening to his voice and following where he leads, sheep become the one flock, no longer interested in the hired hands who care only for themselves in the end. We find unity under this shepherd. We find green pastures and still waters. With the Good Shepherd, we find goodness and mercy following us all the days of our lives. With the Good Shepherd, we can dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

¹ <https://aleteia.org/2019/05/12/three-of-the-oldest-images-of-jesus-portrays-him-as-the-good-shepherd/>