

Living under the Shepherd's Care
Jeremiah 23:1-6
Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

“As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.”

In the aftermath of a month when wrestling with the news of the week propelled Austin and Brian and me into the pulpit, a collective deep breath seems to be in order. I mean this to be no retreat from the realities of racism and injustice and gun violence and terrorism. But if in response to the headlines and the heartbreaks of a world in the thrall of fear and hatred and death, if we mean to bear witness to the counter truth of God's reign, then we also would do well, now and again, to spend a Sunday remembering what the content of the gospel is. To wit, what does it mean and what does it matter to live under the care of the Lord who is our Shepherd, who preserves and governs those whose whole lives are “hung upon a thread like a gossamer,” who preserves and governs you and me? I know no better prod for our memory than the words of the 23rd Psalm.

Of course, they are such familiar words that we fail to hear in them God's living and always surprising word to us. Therefore I ask you to suspend disbelief, for the next few minutes. Quiet the doubts by which you refuse the invitation to live in relationship to the love for which you were made. Imagine yourself, in spite of yourself, as a vulnerable child who is grasped, claimed, held, and found by the One who seeks and saves the lost. Oh, and one last help if you are having trouble picturing the shepherd in these verses, substitute Jesus for every third person singular male pronoun. Then say with me, not because you believe but in order to believe, say just this: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

At the heart of this psalm is the gift of a relationship with the one who keeps you and accompanies you in life and in death. It is a relationship that “rests not on human possibility and

initiative.... [But rather] without any possibility on our side, God's great possibility comes into view," Karl Barth says. Notice that the psalmist does not begin with himself or with his subjective feelings; he does not construct some reasonable argument for the possibility that there is a shepherd. He begins with the gift of a relationship on which everything he is and is about to say depends: there is a shepherd to whom he belongs. To belong to the shepherd means that, from the beginning to the end, the psalmist is not alone; means that, from sunrise to the night watches, he is seen, his cries are heard. He says this because it has been said to him by the community the shepherd has gathered for generations. Yet he says this for himself. It is the one true word on which his life depends, the relationship that alone is worthy of his trust.

The psalmist could have trusted other truths he had been told: trusted in the promises of kings and princes; trusted in the potential of human beings for good; trusted in his own reason or moral rectitude or philosophical surmises; trusted in various other gods and their promises. Perhaps he once had hung his heart on all of these and discovered that they could not bear the weight. All we know now is that his life has come to this: he lives and will live in the company of the shepherd, to whom he belongs, now and forever.

Then in the same breath, the psalmist says, "I shall not want." Try saying these words together: The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Of the eighteen places the verb "want" appears in Scripture, only here and in Nehemiah is an object missing: "Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they did not lack." He is telling us that lack is simply not part of the experience of those whose lives are under the shepherd's care. According to exegete Roy Heller, "the fact that 'the Lord is my shepherd' and the fact that 'I do not lack' are so integrally connected, so inherently a part of one another, that one fact does not 'cause' the other. The shepherding of God and the absence of lack are simply two sides of the same coin." "I have

learned to be content with whatever I have,” Paul wrote to the affluent Philippians. “I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all things, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.” The secret is this: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Say it again. This is no Pollyanna worldview; it is simply the case for those who live under the shepherd’s care.

The psalmist next describes a few details of his life under the shepherd’s care: “He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.” The shepherd sustains the psalmist’s physical life. No doubt, God uses near at hand means to sustain the life of God’s creatures, including actual, albeit flawed, on the ground shepherds, rulers, doctors, congregations, just economic arrangements that afford all people green pastures and still waters. But more. When the psalmist’s inner strength has abated, the shepherd restores his soul. Meaning what? In spite of the evidence at hand, the shepherd keeps him from despair; never leaves him alone; turns his eyes toward the horizon of hope. One of the verbs used by theologians to speak of God’s providence is God’s upholding or preserving. In these ways, the psalmist is kept in life.

The second verb of God’s providence is God’s governing. The shepherd’s governance is just this: he leads the psalmist in paths of righteousness. As Karl Barth describes this in a little book on the Apostles’ Creed, “I am not left to my waywardness and my own ideas; but I have [God’s] commandments, to which I may hold in everything....The glad tidings [of the gospel] are first in the field and, as such, include the law.” Yet some translations read, “He leads me in right paths.” Knowing the dangers and temptations of the wilderness, aware of the cliffs of fall, the shepherd in ancient Israel would toss stones to the right and the left of the flock, gently leading the sheep away from the paths that tempted them to stray and so lose themselves among

thieves and robbers. Under the shepherd's care, the psalmist is led on the paths that turn him toward home, toward the love for which he was made.

All of that said, this psalm has led those of us who know nothing of shepherds to romanticize them. According to Jeremiah, shepherds were a perfect metaphor for rulers who were as likely to destroy and scatter and abandon their people as they were to watch over them. Here I think of so many of you whose troubles and trials have led you to conclude that God is the sort of shepherd Jeremiah describes. The experience is one of being abandoned by an idea of God your experience contradicts. That idea is usually of a God who is able to keep mortals from harm and chooses not to do so; is able to heal as Jesus healed the sick in Mark's sixth chapter, and does not. This idea of God is not the God who meets us in Scripture, who meets us in Jesus Christ: the God whose almighty powerless love is more akin to the father of the prodigal. With this idea of God in your head, I can imagine you hearing the words of the psalmist thus far and assuming the psalmist's charmed life has given him the luxury of believing that he is living under a shepherd's care.

But then the psalm takes a turn: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Life under the shepherd's care does not keep the psalmist from being pursued by evil or from the threat of death-dealing powers. Yet as he is pursued, the psalmist fears no evil because he is accompanied by the shepherd. *For thou art with me* "stands in the exact center of the psalm, with twenty-six words before it and twenty-six words after it," Jim Limburg notes. Notice as well that the psalmist is no longer talking *about* the shepherd; pursued by death, he is speaking in the second person *to* the shepherd: his comforter [whose rod and staff will ultimately do business with evil and death], and his host [whose table in the wilderness is set in a tent where, according to the laws of hospitality, the psalmist's pursuers cannot enter]. That is to say, when all evidence

points to everything being against him, precisely there the psalmist's relationship with the shepherd is intimate: thou art with me.

Writing in the midst of enormous pain and not knowing, as a tumor snaked up his spine, the novelist Reynolds Price speaks of the experience of being accompanied. Price was not particularly religious, part of the reason I am drawn to him; but he was raised, as a Presbyterian in North Carolina, to live under the shepherd's care. If you have been in this church long enough, you have heard Price's words from the pulpit. He writes, "I'd lie alone in my bed in the dark and sense the presence, just to the right in my mind's eye, of a patient listener behind the screen....I never asked myself who it was, from the gallery of possible hearers....It—he, she or whatever—never spoke a sound but only heard me out as I worked at discovering my minimal needs and feasible hopes. I never asked it, point-blank, for answers—not yet, anyhow. Its reliable presence seemed only to say that I had somehow to build my life on radical uncertainty, knowing only that I was heard by something more than the loyal but powerless humans near me." Price does not discount foxhole conversions; he only observes that in the foxholes of danger, disease, disillusionment and the valley of the shadow, taking prior pains to know the shepherd—perhaps in green pastures and beside still waters—tends to call out of those in extremis the cry, "What's next?" rather than "Why me?"

Next and at the end, the psalmist finds himself pursued, literally *chased*, by the goodness and mercy of God all the days of his life. Whereas the end of evil pursuers is the death of the pursued, the end of God's pursuit and the destiny of the psalmist's life is the eternity and love that God is.

Karl Barth wrote that faith is "the gift of the meeting in which [you] become free to hear the word of grace God has spoken in Jesus Christ in such a way that, in spite of all that

contradicts it, [you] may once for all, exclusively and entirely, hold to [God's] promise and guidance." Given another week filled with racism and injustice and gun violence and terrorism, when the headlines and the heartaches of the world contradict the word of grace God has spoken in Jesus Christ, the word we nevertheless have for the world is this: there is a shepherd to whom you belong. In the fullness of time and at the center of your life, with twenty-six lines before and twenty-six lines ahead, he is with you. Suspend disbelief; quiet your doubts; picture yourself as the vulnerable child that you are. Then write these words on your heart, for they hold in solution the gift of a meeting with the shepherd, under whose care you may live all the days of your life, and in whose house you are destined to dwell forever. Thanks be to God.