

March 15th 2020 – St Andrew's [Lent III]
Sermon – "Risking Faith"

The 23rd Psalm expresses some of the most beautiful and deeply comforting images in the whole Bible.

Although it's about God the Father,
 it's impossible not to think of Jesus,
 when we hear "the Lord is my shepherd,"
 even though the psalm was written
 hundreds of years earlier.

This warm pastoral metaphor and its simply-stated faith
 – I shall not want –

resonates deeply with Christians, and it always has.

It appears in the Old Testament,
 Jesus used it with his disciples,
 and it's a widely-used in Christian art and song.

More than this, though, the psalm's also got a resoundingly happy ending:
 a blessed present and future with God.

It's a beautiful poem, a beautiful song,
 and a beautiful expression of the relationship
 we have with God.

When I was planning this service a month ago,
 the world was a different place.

On that peaceful February afternoon,
 words like coronavirus and pandemic,
 self-isolation and social distancing
 weren't even in my vocabulary.

The over 150 thousand people currently suffering from this terrible illness,
 the nearly 6000 dead, the worry and fear
 that are permeating so many lives
 around the world this morning...

...none of that was on our horizon.

I had planned to preach this morning on
 Martha and Mary, Lazarus and Jesus...

...and changed my mind last night around supper time.

But I try to be faithful in my call to follow
 where the Spirit leads us in worship,
 and so I want to share with you all
 a reflection on the 23rd Psalm,
 a personal favourite
 that has grown more dear to me
 now that I count several sheep among my friends.

Martha, Mary, Lazarus and Jesus will have to wait for another time.

Not all of you will know that
in between being an archaeologist and a minister,
I was a shepherd alongside my parents.

There are a lot of sheep and shepherd metaphors in the Bible.
But we aren't quite so rural a society as we once were,
and definitely less reliant on sheep
than the ancient Israelites or the people Jesus spoke to.

Not very many of us know very much about sheep...
...other than noticing the fluffy white blobs
out in the field as we drive by.

Martin Luther, the German theologian
who kicked off the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago,
suggested that every minister who wants to preach on Psalm 23
should go out and get to know some sheep first!

And I have to tell you,
after spending a year as a fulltime shepherd
and many more years part-time
– he's right.

The sheep stories in the Bible
– and acknowledging that God is my good shepherd –
have taken on new meaning for me.

So here is a little of what I've learned about sheep
and being a shepherd who loves her flock.

There are a few generalisations that can be made.

Sheep are not very independent;
they do need someone to follow,
whether it's their shepherd or another sheep
– we call her the boss ewe –
and they panic when they're by themselves.

They are very vulnerable to bruises and cuts,
sprains and illnesses, wolf attacks and groundhog holes,
and going through the birth of their lambs in spring
is one of the most wonderful and terrible
experiences of my life;
the hardest births,
the ones where mother or lamb or both
are sometimes lost,
always seem to happen
after midnight.

A sheep is a very fair-minded animal...
 ...in the sense that she doesn't think that you should have
 something different that she doesn't have.
 And if you sneak her a little corn once,
 you'd better be prepared to do it every day,
 or deal with the biggest, saddest eyes
 you've ever seen.
 And yes, I learned that one
 the hard way.

Sheep really do know their shepherd's voices and faces,
 and they'll run like the wind from anyone else.
 One well-meaning city minister of my acquaintance
 described a sheep flock as noisy and smelly...
 ...and to a stranger, it might seem that way.

But to their shepherd,
 that noise is a chorus of individual, recognisable voices,
 and those baa's can mean all sorts of things:
 we need new pasture, I'm lost,
 hello there, where's my lamb,
 where's my sibling, let's go back to the barn.

We've got a pair of sisters
 – Dora and Delilah –
 who'll stand one at the top of the hill
 and the other in the barnyard
 and baa and stare at each other,
 arguing about whether they should go in
 or stay out.

And the smell of hay and molasses and lanolin is not unpleasant at all...
 ...although sometimes the barn might need cleaning out!

When you get to know them, sheep each have different personalities too:
 some are silly, some smart,
 some are excellent mothers,
 and some need to be reminded again and again
 to love their lambs;
 some sheep are very business-like
 about their food,
 and some will leap up
 to pluck single leaves
 off the apple tree

just to taste something different.

A good shepherd knows her flock, as a group and as individuals.
 She'll notice if someone's acting different,
 wandered off or crossed a fence,
 if they're favouring a leg or off their feed.
 Sometimes a sheep will even come to the shepherd
 if they're hurt;
 one of my lambs a couple of summers ago
 had cut her lip,
 and she walked right up to me
 and showed me
 her sore mouth.
 And I looked after it for her.

A good shepherd seeks the lost,
 reunites the strayed, binds up the injured,
 feeds them, strengthens the weak, protects them,
 and gently tends the flock.

So yes, on balance, it may not be tremendously flattering to be called a sheep.
 But that relationship between sheep and shepherd?
 That's incredibly special when there's love and trust on both sides.

The next line
 – “he makes me lie down in green pastures” –
 is often taken as an image of rest and peace.
 And there is an element of that to it.
 But it's the kind of peace you experience
 when you're drifting off on the couch
 after Thanksgiving dinner.

It's an image of abundance, the first of two in Psalm 23.
 Sheep don't ordinarily lie down in their pastures
 – they walk around eating.
 Rest takes place where there's shelter;
 the barn, under a tree or by water.
 A sheep does not lie down on pasture
 unless she is so full
 that she can't wedge in
 another mouthful.
 She is not hungry at all;
 she's just waiting for everyone else to be full too,
 before they all head back into the barn together.

She has had more than enough:
her belly is full, her cup overflowing.

Together, these first lines of this beloved psalm
create a feeling of what life is like as one of God's sheep:
there's a sense of trust, care, being well-tended and well-fed.
A peaceful, golden moment
rooted in the relationship
between sheep and shepherd,
and infused with grace:
God's people are God's sheep,
and we don't need to be
more than that for him.

From here, from this serene beginning,
the psalmist takes us on a journey.
You mightn't have noticed this particularly before,
but there are a lot of movement verbs in this psalm:
leading, walking, following.
But likewise throughout the psalm,
our shepherd is with us:
comforting, guiding, present;
beside still waters,
along paths of righteousness,
through dark valleys.

I don't think I need to warn you all anymore that I'm a bit of language geek,
and that I like to investigate the original ancient words
used by the writers of the biblical texts,
rather than just our English version.

So the phrase "paths of righteousness"
– the word for "path" is more like tracks or even ruts
that are made by the wheels of an ox-cart.
So, the "paths of righteousness"
are more like ruts in the ground,
grooves for the wheels of your ox-cart.

To get into that righteous groove is to live in a way
that loves, forgives, encourages, helps and hopes;
to live nurturing right relationships all around you,
with each other and with God.
To live this way, the psalmist writes,
is to proclaim with our whole self what God is really like.

As Christians who read this text,
 we know that Jesus is not only our good shepherd,
 but he's also the trailblazer of our path of righteousness.
 It's Jesus who tends us and guides us,
 and that's so important to remember.
 Because the paths of righteousness
 do not lead directly
 from the green pastures to the house of the Lord.
 No, those righteous ruts
 go through the very darkest valleys.

For Jesus, his path led to the Cross
 and eventually into new life.
 For Martha and Mary,
 that path led to the intense grief of losing their brother,
 and to the uncertainty in that conversation
 between Martha and Jesus.

Fierce, hard-working, outspoken Martha
 hears that Jesus is coming and goes out,
 down the road, to meet him.
 In her grief, she tells Jesus
 that if he'd been there,
 this awful thing,
 her brother dying,
 wouldn't have happened.

And then she tells him, "I know you can fix this."
 Jesus answered her with a promise:
 your brother will rise again.
 She misunderstood at first,
 but finally, she understands
 that what Jesus is asking her is this:
 "I am the resurrection and the life...
 ...do you believe in *me*?"

Martha answered, "yes, I believe."
 And that was enough.

Even our darkest and most shadowed valleys
 are inhabited by the Spirit;
 even as we walk through them,
 we are still held in the hand of God;

even as we grieve and love until it hurts,
 Jesus stands with us, weeping and loving,
 until we are ready to keep going.
 And when we are,
 it's Jesus who shows us the way through
 and calls us to follow him
 along a path
 he has already walked himself.
 We will fear no evil,
 because we belong to Jesus
 and we walk with him.
 When we are led out of our valley of the shadow of death,
 what awaits us once more is God's abundance.
 There is a table, a feast,
 in the midst of and in spite of
 our enemies.
 Whatever those enemies are
 – grief or fear,
 Doubt or pride,
 pain, illness or despair –
 we journey through them
 in faith and hope.
 And that's because we know
 that there is something after.
 At this table, we are anointed with oil
 – a sign of blessing and belonging –
 and our cup of blessing is so full
 that it runs over.
 At this table, our bellies
 once more will be filled.

But there is one last movement in the psalm:
 "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."
 It's a comforting image:
 as we walk along our path
 in our groovy rut of righteousness,
 God's goodness and mercy will follow us.
 But it's not a passive, plodding
 goodness and mercy,
 trailing along behind us.

No, the word "follow" here is better translated as pursue.
 It's a surprising word to find here, though,
 since in other psalms,

it's enemies that are pursuing
with the intent to overtake and destroy.
It's an active, even aggressive, verb
that the psalmist chose.

So we can think of this line as telling us
that the only things chasing us down
are going to be goodness and mercy.
No enemy
– no lingering shadow from the valley –
pursues us.
We will fear no evil,
because surely, only,
God's goodness and mercy
will be allowed to chase after us.

The final line of the psalm
– “I will dwell in the house of the Lord” –
it's like a sigh of relief after a long, stressful day, isn't it?
A peaceful end to our journeys
filled with a strong and resolute desire
to stay where we've ended up,
in the house of our Lord.

When this psalm is used at the funerals or memorial services of faithful Christians,
we are comforted by this happy ending
for our deceased brother or sister.
But for you and I,
we who are still rolling along our ruts of righteousness,
is there comfort here for us too?

Here again, the Hebrew word translated as “dwell” has another meaning,
one that makes just as much sense
when you pay attention to the journeying theme in this psalm.
It can also mean to turn or return.
So for those of us who are not yet
at the end of our path, we can read it this way:
“I will turn to God's presence my whole life long.”

Ultimately, Psalm 23 is about the profound goodness of God:
God is our shepherd, and we are his sheep.
Sin and evil, the brokenness and sharp edges

that sin has made of creation,
make our lives complicated
and hard and painful sometimes.

But we make our journey in the presence of God,
as part of his flock
and with the gracious, hopeful and abundant
goodness and mercy of God
being the only things
that can successfully chase us down.

Our lives don't go straight from green pastures
to a seat at the overflowing table in the Lord's house.
But we follow a path blazed through the darkest valleys
by Christ himself, our great shepherd,
who never leaves even one of us behind,
never leaves us hurting without care and attention,
never leaves us weeping alone
at the mouth of the tomb,
and never leaves our bellies
– our hearts –
empty.

And that brings us full circle, I think,
back to the beginning of the psalm.
When the secular, non-Christian world,
when pandemics and wars,
when doubts and fears, grief and loss,
demand that you ask why God
doesn't stop those bad things
from happening...

...I hope your answer will be Martha's answer,
and the psalmists':
I believe in Jesus;
he is my shepherd.
Amen.