

Good Shepherd, Home Again You Brought Me

The Shepherd Psalm 23 is the most beloved of all the psalms. It must have been a favorite of Jesus as well, for he loved to use the image of the shepherd. Jesus was a master of Scripture. He did more than pray this psalm. He embodied its vision and lived out its dream. Before reflecting on this Good Shepherd chapter, we will review the beautiful words of Psalm 23 and then see how it was used by Jesus. The shepherds of Spain have handed down a traditional interpretation of this psalm based on their own experience with their flocks. Their touching words will guide us here.

The opening verse, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” speaks about the trusting attitude of the sheep. Instinctively, they know the shepherd will care for them. Christ is our shepherd who loves us. Our response to him should be one of trust based on the conviction Jesus will always care for us.

The psalm continues, “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” The grazing habits of sheep are strictly structured. At 3:30 in the morning they begin eating and continue until 10:00a.m. when they rest. The shepherd directs them first to the rough herbage, then to the smoother grass, and finally to the rich, fine, sweet grass of the green pasture. Then he “makes them lie down” contentedly in the verdant pasture.

Jesus feeds us first with the rough herbage of challenging Christian ideals. He does not give us a soft religion, but one that opens us to the difficulties of loving others, serving their needs, struggling for justice, alleviating the needs of the poor, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, consoling the hurting people, and conquering evil. But he knows we also need the smoother grass of affirmation. He touches our hearts with his affection, assuring us that he loves us and expressing his delight with our moral commitments. Lastly, he makes us lie down in green pastures, knowing that we need the quiet of prayer and the rest of contemplation where our souls are renewed by the stream of power from his divine energy.

Sheep will not drink from running streams. Hence the verse, “Beside restful waters he leads me.” The shepherd must often construct little pools of still water so the sheep may drink. Jesus knows we will not find refreshing water on the fast track of modern life. Our fast pace will never satisfy the deeper thirst of our spirits.

Call it the parched throat of the soul or psychological burn-out, the result is the same. Jesus brings us to stillness which permits us to drink from the renewing inner fountains of grace. He announced that gift at Tabernacles and delivers on his promise by being himself the source of that restful water.

Everyone knows the next verse, so familiar, so consoling. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.” There is a valley of the shadow of death in Palestine. It is a narrow pass, four miles long, stretching from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea. The walls of the valley are 1,500 feet high. The width seldom exceeds fifteen feet.

Only one path cuts through it, barely a foot wide. Twice a year the shepherd takes his flocks through it because of a change in climate. The sheep encounter three dangers. First, a small ravine breaks the path midway through the valley. The sheep must be coaxed to leap over it. Sometimes the shepherd carries the mother sheep across it so the lambs will be encouraged to jump it to be with her. If they fall, the shepherd uses the curved end of his staff to pull them out.

The second danger is the pointed rocks which menace the sheep on all sides. The last problem is the wild dogs and wolves who prowl the valley. The lead sheep gives a signal should they appear. The shepherd rushes forward, using the pointed end of his staff to drive away or kill the enemy. If sheep could speak in this situation, they might say: “Your rod and your staff. They comfort me.”

We always walk in the shadow of death no matter our age. Babies die of crib death. Drunken drivers kill children. Teenagers commit suicide. Joggers are killed in dark parks. Vacationers and business travelers die in plane crashes. Young men die in wars and young women die of drugs. Cancer, heart trouble and old age beckon death.

Jesus knows the shadow of death lies over the whole human race. He accepted his own death as the price of being human. He endured a violent death to save us from sin and to conquer death itself. Like the shepherd in the psalm he saves us from life’s major dangers. We all come to ravines across which we must jump. He is with us to give us the courage. Should we fall, he uses the curved end of his staff – the Sacrament of Reconciliation—to pull us up so we can start again.

For each of us life is full of pointed rocks, whose sharp edges rough us up, annoy us, wear us down. Jesus stays with us urging us forward despite the wearing nuisances of living. Lastly, the wild dogs and wolves of evil and sin want to eat us, consume our spiritual strength, and enslave us to self destructive behavior. We cannot hope to fight off the forces of evil alone. We just do not have sufficient spiritual resources because we are fundamentally weakened by original sin. Jesus came precisely to be the “extra added ingredient,” the spiritual power that makes it possible for us to overcome sin and evil.

The iron-hard end of his staff will drive away the forces of evil and deliver us. Why else do we pray, "Deliver us from evil." What other words could console us more effectively? "Jesus, your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

At night, the sheep enter, one by one, into the sheepfold. There is only one opening. The walls of the enclosure are made of rocks piled on one another and topped with thorn bushes to keep out predatory animals. The shepherd inspects each one for cure and fever. Any sheep wounded that day by rocks or thorns is anointed with oil. Then, to cool the fever of any animal, the shepherd plunges the head of the sheep into a basin of cool water to lower the temperature. Thus the meaning of the next verse.

"You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows."

Jesus will say that he is the gate of the sheepfold. There is no door for the enclosure. The shepherd lies down at the one opening, becomes the living door to the fold. He guards them with his body. To enter the community of Christ the beloved, we must go through him whose body serves as the gate to happiness. He inspects each one of us for the cuts of sin and the fever of passions. He plunges our heads into the cool waters of baptism to allay the fevers of passions that have imprisoned us in sin. He anoints our cuts of sin with the oil of Confirmation that we may have divine courage to withstand all evil. So he makes it possible for goodness and kindness to be our goals all the days of our lives.

Jesus is the Shepherd of the Shepherd Psalm (John 10:1-16)

As we read the first eighteen verses of the tenth chapter of John we can see how Jesus applied to himself the matchless verses of Psalm 23. As the Word of God he inspired the author of those imperishable words. In his years of growth at Nazareth, tutored by Mary and his "Abba" heavenly Father, he sang those verses and envisioned how they could be lived out here on earth.

He taught that he was the only opening to the community of love, the only door to the Kingdom. His body lay across the opening, just as shepherds would do that night in all the hills of Galilee. A good shepherd knows his sheep by name. He might call one "black ear" or another "brown leg." The sheep know his voice and will not respond to the call of a stranger. H. V. Morton writes that Palestinian shepherds talk to their sheep in a sing-song voice in a language seemingly invented just for this communication. Almost animal like. If the shepherd lets them drift away for a while, he calls them back with a strange laughing noise that has them flocking back to him.

Jesus knows each of us by name, certainly by our baptismal name when we were made his followers. Through prayerful communion with him we begin to "hear" his voice, affectionate, affirming, ready to feed us with the life of the Spirit. This is most evident in the lives of the saints who converse so intimately with Christ, relaxed and at home with him. Just as we need to tune our ears to hear the harmonies and melodies of great symphonies, so we must attune our hearing to the voice of Christ. He does speak. But we must have ears to hear. Jesus repeated, "I am the gate" (verse 7).

“Through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:18). A shepherd gave his sheep the freedom to go in and go out without fear. Jesus does the same. “Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture” (verse 9). In this age of locked doors, iron bars on windows and security systems, we all know what it means to be afraid. We do not have as much freedom “to go in and go out” as we would like. It is a blessing to have freedom from fear. What we must fear most is becoming a slave of our passions and sinfulness. Jesus assures us that he can deliver us from this worst of human ills. He will give us the freedom to “go in and go out,” liberated from sin.

Throughout this passage Jesus frequently referred to “strangers,” “hirelings” and “wolves.” These are the false shepherds. The strangers will charm us away from our Christian faith. They will promise the goodies of this world in exchange for the graces of Christ. They promise us happiness, but deliver us to despair, like the drug dealers who lurk at the edges of children’s playgrounds. Whether it be a killing on the stock market, another extra-marital fling, one more drink for the road, the lottery ticket, the horse that will finally win – the whole thing is a vast illusion from the greatest of all hypnotists, the “stranger,” the world that kids us in order to enslave us. Jesus warns us against listening to the voice of the stranger who does not have our own best interest at heart.

The second voice comes from the “hireling.” This person takes care of the sheep so long as there is not much trouble associated with it. If the wolves come, the hireling will run away and leave the sheep to the mercy of the predators. A real shepherd works for love. The hireling works only for money. Only love has the spirit to protect people. Love is the substance of courage. The shepherds of the church come in many forms: pope, bishops, priests, nuns, parents, teachers. If they are just hirelings, then the church will have sheep without shepherds. The wolves will come and consume them.

The world – in the sense of the unredeemed world – is no friend of Jesus, no friend of Christianity. It is the wolf. When the shepherds of our homes, schools and parishes become merely hirelings, then the wolf has a feast. Real shepherds are brave. They defend their people even at the cost of their lives. Jesus states the principle by which a good shepherd must live. “I will lay down my life for the sheep” (verse 15).

Sometimes the wolf is inside the church, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. This is more dangerous because the enemy is less recognizable. Instead of voicing an obvious temptation or roaring a fearful threat, this wolf is like the cunning serpent. Seduction is then the name of the game. Evil is made to seem like goodness. Lies assume the mantle of church teaching. Unwary people buy this food and discover they are poisoned. They become sick before they realize what happened. They are drugged by the pill in the attractive package. Our secularized society can – and sometimes does – infiltrate the pulpits, classrooms, and homes of our parishes and dioceses as the wolf in sheep’s clothing. We must be awake and aware of this kind of bad shepherd who can destroy us.

Decide to Love (John 10:17-18)

Why does the Father love Jesus? Because Jesus made his whole life an act of obedience to his Father. He did not do whatever he liked. He did what he should have done. He never separated glory from the cross. "I lay down my life in order to take it up again" (verse 17). He faced death willingly. He absolutely anticipated victory over death. He will take up his life again. He was not being pushed around by determinisms, not in the inner drives of his passions, not the course of history, not the social forces in Galilee and Judea. He acted in magnificent freedom. That is why he was such a terrific shepherd.

And that is what every shepherd in the church is called to be.

Hanukkah – The Festival of Lights (John 10:19-42)

The time was winter.

As evening fell, the cold was relieved by countless pinpoints of light for eight days. Candles and oil lamps glowed from the windows of every home. This was the one time when people indulged in this extravagance. Some families could even afford the *Menorah*, a seven branched candlestick, similar to its giant original version at the temple. In December, the Jews celebrated – as they do today – Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, also called the Dedication. Once again John situates a teaching of Jesus against the background of a liturgical feast, this time the Dedication.

We can trace its history to the reign of a Syrian King, Antiochus Epiphanes, 175-164BC. He was overly fond of Greek culture, religion and philosophy and determined that the Jewish people should adopt it. They absolutely refused to accept a new religion and also rejected aspects of Greek culture which they found abhorrent. At first he tried persuasion and then force.

He sent in the troops and started a reign of terror. The death penalty was imposed on anyone who circumcised a child, or had a copy of the Law (first five books of the Bible). Jewish religion was to be exterminated. Rooms at the temple were used for prostitution. A statue of Zeus was installed on the altar of holocausts. The king plundered the gold of the temple and took all the money in the treasury.

The people revolted. In a six year war, Judas Maccabeus and his brother mounted a bloody campaign which they finally won in 164 BC. The temple was cleansed and purified, the altar rebuilt and all that was needed for liturgy restored. The feast of the Dedication recalls this event. It became customary for every family to put a light in the window in memory of this achievement of religious and political freedom.

During this feast, Jesus once again witnessed his message and identity authoritatively in the temple. "The Father and I are one" (verse 30). His unity with the Father was one of perfect love and perfect obedience. His claim aroused murderous feelings in his opponents and they picked up stones to kill him for what they considered to be blasphemy.

Jesus asked them to name the good *works* for which they wanted to stone him. They wanted to kill him for his *words*, his “blasphemous” claim. Jesus granted that they might be blinded by his words, but surely his deeds should give them a different point of view. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and soothed those who were hurting. Did not such goodness originate from God? Is not loving behavior a window through which shone the divine presence? As he stood that evening by the Menorah, the golden glow of the seven candles bathed him in warmth. But they could not see the Good Shepherd or the Light of the World. They saw only an enemy who must be killed.