

THE GOOD SHEPHERD  
Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18  
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Of all the passages of scripture in the Bible, one of the most widely known and loved is the 23rd Psalm. Or as one of the members of our Monday Bible Study described it, it's on the Biblical list of all time hits.

The psalm's pastoral images of a shepherd who gently leads his flock and tends the wayward but dependent sheep has been an encouragement to faithful people for generations. It is recited at memorials and is used as a bedtime prayer for many. I often say it when visiting in the hospital. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures." And it's clear throughout this psalm that the shepherd that is being praised is a good and kindly shepherd. One who is willing to provide for his flock, one who protects them in times of danger, and who defends them, even with his own life.

There are stained glass windows in churches around the world depicting Jesus surrounded by sheep. It is one of our best loved images of Jesus.

It's no wonder then, that of all the sayings attributed to him one of the most comforting is taken from this picture we have in our minds of Jesus as the good and kindly shepherd of the 23rd Psalm and of the 10th chapter of John's gospel.

"I am the good shepherd," said Jesus. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And as we sort and sift through the meaning of what happened on the cross and in the empty tomb one of the things we take away is the belief that Jesus' life is given as a good shepherd's is given for the sake of all those who are entrusted to his care, who rely on his protection and kind heart.

In the fields, part of the work of the shepherd is to herd the sheep into safe places when danger is near. Wolves and jackals were predators who liked to sneak into the flock and attack an unsuspecting lamb straying from the others. If the shepherd was a good shepherd and not just a hired hand, he knew how to keep a watchful eye on all the flock, guide them each night into some natural hiding place where they would be safe. And then in the narrow way, the shepherd would light his campfire and keep watch through the night, lying down in harm's way, between the flock and any danger that might intrude. It was this willingness to lose his life for the sake of the flock that made the ties between the sheep and the shepherd one of empathy and compassion.

It is the ultimate sacrifice, the willingness of one person to do something so utterly good and selfless that even giving up his life for the sake of the other would not be too much. Do any of us have such a passion as that in our lives? Something or someone who is so valued and treasured to us that we would be willing to give up our own life for his or her sake?

Somehow I think there is in all of us some true bravery, some great moment of which we might be capable of such a sacrifice. Something within us that is able to rise to true selflessness.

But short of war and the extraordinary demands of unusual circumstances, not many of us are really required to make the ultimate sacrifice of giving our lives for another. For us it may never be just one moment in time that we are called upon to lose ourselves by giving ourselves away, some Joan of Arc heroism that is called for, some firefighter's carry that rescues the body from the burning building, but rather an ongoing call to selflessness and constancy. That really is the essence of being a good shepherd. It is providing day after day for the well being of those with whose care you have been entrusted. It is leading another beside still waters. It is providing for their want.

The work of a pastor, whose title is borrowed from the vocabulary of shepherding is like that. Pastoral care is tending, feeding, and protecting the flock of the congregation. But really, the closest thing on earth to this constant shepherding, is being a father, or being a mother.

When I go to Christ Hospital to visit, I stop for a moment at the front entrance..

Often there is a different car parked in front of the doors and there is yet another couple who are taking their newborn son or daughter home for the first time. I look at those couples with amazement as she gingerly rises from the wheelchair, giving up her precious cargo to a father who will nestle both his "babies" in the car. He hardly knows how to hold this infant yet, he is so new to the role. And all three of them look so young, infant, mother, and father. Those twenty or thirty something parents have the eyes of deer in headlights. Like they don't know what hit them, or will. And of course they don't.

Who knows what it will be for them to be parents? Whether their child will be well or not. Whether she will be rebellious or feisty or colicky. How terrible her two's will be. Or how deficient of attention. Whether she will be bouncing off the walls so hard at seven that she will be taking Ritalin. Or whether she will be so calm that they will worry whether she has some kind of vitamin deficiency.

Will she pierce her nose? Will she go to the prom? What dreams will he have for a lifetime? And will Prince Charming ever come? Oh, and rue the thought, how many toads will she kiss before she finds him?

It all crosses my mind in an instant at the doorway to the hospital as I see those parents taking their dependent home, never more dependent on the help of God and of each other than they are at that very moment.

It occurs to me that at last, both of these young adults now know what it is to be lost in someone else, to be totally and completely responsible for another human being, who is totally and utterly in need of their help. They thought their wedding day was that moment. But it was not. It was only the beginning of plumbing the depths of losing yourself for the sake of another.

This child, is one for whom they will now give their life. This is the one at last in whom they will lose their lives, and in losing them, find them. This infant is the one for whom they will be willing both to live and to die, as the Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep.

There will of course, be moments in these parents lives when they will want to give it all up. Times when they will have had enough of the responsibility of the thing.

I am reminded of Anne Lamott's notation in her diary remembering a day in her son Sam's first year of life, when she writes,

"December 2. It has been a terrible day. I'm afraid I'm going to have to let him go. He's an awful baby. I hate him. He's scum."

At least there is one parent in this world who is willing to admit that there are days when a mother, or a father for that matter, is ready to give up. It is, after all, your self that you are letting go. And it is no small sacrifice. There are days if not seasons when the whole parenting thing is exasperating.

The child comes into the kitchen and there is paint all over him, his shirt, his hands, his hair. He has been in the garage "coloring" (his word) the ugly black tires on the car.

He goes to the neighbor's yard and decides to water their plants, but ends up leaving the faucet running all day and drowning them.

She goes to the mall and hangs out with those boys with the skateboards that you have told her she is forbidden to see. And you wonder if this is merely a failure to communicate or a declaration of war against your authority.

It is not easy being the shepherd of such willful and errant sheep.

And if it is difficult, bordering on impossible, for even the best of parents, how much more is it difficult for God. Hoping so much for us. Tending us so carefully. Watching over us so faithfully. Hopelessly in love with us, not so much in spite of ourselves, but because of ourselves. God seems never to have second thoughts about being our shepherd, so patient is this divine Mother/Father.

All that I have said notwithstanding, the point of the shepherding images in the 23rd Psalm and in the 10th chapter of John's gospel are not to urge upon us the role of being a better shepherd as we care for our children, or lead in the community, or pastor a church. Who could live up to it? The point is to remind us what a kind and generous and Good Shepherd we already have in Jesus. We who are so wayward, so stubborn, so willful, so intent on losing our way.

Ours is a good shepherd whose patience is everlasting and whose mercy is from generation to generation. And that's amazing when you consider what a pain some of us must really be to God. If I had been in charge of my case, instead of God, I think I would have given up long ago. And if I was bad, you should have known my brother Tim.

It is not easy being a good shepherd. Sheep are such a willful lot. And so dependent. And so prone to get lost.

The good news of God's love for us is that, while all we, like sheep, have gone astray, God's love is from everlasting to everlasting. And somehow, God's patience endures forever.

I am not sure that there is much hope for this flock that we are. We are so willful. So dependent. So prone to get lost. So intent on messing things up. We turn on those who love us most. We abuse the relationships of trust in which we live. Our anger gets the best of us. We are afraid of the dragons and demons that seem to battle so close to us, and within us.

We just don't want to grow up, or stay with the flock, or do anything other than what we want to do, even when we have no idea in the world what it is we want to do. We are, after all, sheepishly human, and who is to blame us for messing things up so royally?

Ironically, not the one we think. Not the one we are afraid may be most angry. For that one is the Good Shepherd who loves us as a mother loves, who cradles us in her arms with unceasing tenderness, who beholds us with inexhaustible forgiveness, and who understands us with infinite patience.

God, who loves us more than we know, and forgives us more than we deserve is tending us now, gently leading all who are astray, watching over all who are in danger.

By night and by day, in all times and in all places God, the Good Shepherd is keeping watch. And so ... the Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.

He leadeth in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. Thanks be to God. Amen.