

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Reflection for Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2012
Scripture Readings: Psalm 23 and Matthew 9:35-36; 18:12-14

VISIONING THROUGH THE SHEPHERD PSALM

If knowing means being able to repeat the words from memory, then I have known the Twenty-third Psalm since childhood. The truth is I have been learning it all my life and will never finish. I keep one version in mind for funeral services, but when I say it for myself (sometimes in the night when I can't sleep), I draw upon different versions including some of my own because the psalm is both simple and subtle; it takes only a few minutes to find comfort in it but a lifetime to draw its faith into myself whether I'm lying in life's green pastures or walking through valleys of shadow.

I ask you now to walk with me through this familiar shepherd psalm and take it to heart as individuals and as a church engaged in visioning, but first we need to recall a principle for understanding the Bible, including its Older Testament. We interpret what we read in the light of the truth of God's will and purpose revealed to us in Jesus, and so we read the Older Testament as redemptive rather than legalistic and vindictive. We understand God's choice of Israel as the work of redemptive love meant to reach out and embrace the world, not as God's favoring one people and despising all others. We need to understand Christianity the same way so we keep realizing the church exists for the sake of the world because God loves the world.

Yahweh, the LORD God – the very God who self-committed to a band of Hebrew slaves and adopted them in love – that God is the One we are calling *our shepherd*. This is personal. This God calls each of us by name. This God will go miles out of the way to find and restore one who is lost, even if lost by his or her own willful choice.

In Israel's part of the world, shepherds did not drive their flocks but led them. We hear Jesus call himself the good shepherd whose sheep know his voice and, trusting him, will follow where he leads.

"I shall not want." The word "want" is used here with its older meaning of "lack" or "go without," and so the psalm begins with trust in God's provision and care. My needs will be met. The needs of a sheep are quite simple: fresh pasture and water tranquil enough not to sweep the animal away in its currents. For us, however, "What do I need?" is a constant question that raises more questions. Do I need all I might desire (or all the stuff I have)? Do

I need more than my neighbors in the world? Is life a matter of competition for scarce resources or of sharing from God's abundant provision? How can we meet human needs without destroying earth's ecosystems, and how can we preserve those ecosystems without repressing the development of impoverished countries when we already have taken far more than our share? How do we change an economy of consumption without plunging ourselves and the whole world into economic depression? Can we, or must we just keep buying more and more until the earth is a toxic waste dump of our material goods?

God "restores my soul." Biblically, you don't have a soul; you *are one*. The word for "soul" includes body as well as spirit. It is the whole person at the deepest levels of self.

"He leads me in paths of righteousness." For sheep, that phrase should be translated simply as "the right paths," and I find that simple translation helpful when I realize, frequently, that I can't see far enough down the road to choose the better path. On their own, sheep will wander off into danger or follow some leader of the moment to their own destruction. They have neither foresight nor much sense. Human beings have far superior intelligence and so can get themselves into far worse trouble and make stupendously wrong choices. We can be quick to follow demagogues who appeal to our worst instincts, fueling rage by playing to our fears and prejudices. "Righteousness," the deeper translation, means right dealing with others *in terms of the relationships* we have with them. Rather than simply being guided by rules and restrictions, we are to follow the rules as they elaborate the law of love, and when the rules fall short, Jesus calls us to go further.

"For his name's sake" requires me to include God in my attitudes toward other people and responses to them. Righteous choices must be seen and made in the larger context of God's love for me *and for them*. God's redemptive love must take the lead, and so my question is not, "What does that person deserve?" or, "How do I feel like responding," but, "What might God want for that person out of this situation?" I am to respond for the sake of God's name because Jesus calls me to represent God's name and serve God's will.

The valley of shadow. Sheep balk at dark, narrow places where predators can lurk unseen to strike quickly, where a shadow can become "the shadow of death" even though that old translation is inaccurate. We humans worry about the future and so feel more keenly the uncertainties of life. We pretend more control over our lives than we ever truly have. We make plans, even long-range plans, but we learn that life has its valleys of the shadow. "I will fear no evil" – *no harm*. That declaration of trust sounds great in the light and comfort of a safe place; it's harder to make from a place of pain and suffering, a time of good reason to fear. But it speaks faith's courage for us, and I have found myself repeating it in the darkness to draw it into myself and make it as true as possible for me.

Jesus never lets us forget the people who live every day in the shadows. For him, the essence of God's coming to us is compassion, which means "suffering *with*" – entering into another's suffering and sharing its space as an equal, not a benefactor. Where people with the means and elevated positions in society to be benefactors choose to see either poor wretches or no-good bums, Jesus sees sisters and brothers. He does not choose between pity and contempt which both stand back from and above the one in misery and want. He chooses compassion and so enters into the darkness of those who dwell in the shadows.

In the last part of the psalm, the image changes from shepherd with sheep to nomadic host with the welcome guest made part of the family for the time of the stay. The guest's enemies can only look on helplessly as the one they would destroy is honored and feasted generously – head anointed and cup filled and refilled to overflowing.

"Surely goodness and faithful love will follow me all the days of my life." That's a radical statement of trust. It's not a naive or selfish faith that expects a jackpot of blessings. Our faith in Jesus Christ centers around compassion not personal success, comfort, or convenience, but as sisters and brothers of Jesus, we trust that God's goodness and faithful love will follow us and uphold us every stumbling step of the way.

"And," the psalm concludes, "I shall dwell in the house of Yahweh *for length of days.*" That's what the Hebrew expression says literally: "for length of days." Does that mean just for a long stay, for my whole life on this earth, or forever? Well, within the context of the psalm's own time in Israel's faith, when there was as yet no belief in resurrection, it probably means for a good, full lifetime however long that may be (certainly shorter back then than now). But in light of Jesus' resurrection and his insistence upon being united with us in God's love, the affirmation expands beyond the limits ancient Israel's faith or of our sight. So, in trust we commit those we love and, finally, ourselves into the hands of our God who brings life out of death and calls into being things that are not. Trusting God when we lie safely in green pastures refreshed by tranquil waters and trusting God also in valleys of shadow, we trust God to lead us safely through the final valley into a pasture greener than we can imagine. Amen.