

Sermon: Belonging

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Psalm 23; John 10:22-30**

The King James version of Psalm 23 is probably the most familiar piece of Scripture any of us has ever heard, except for maybe the first verse in Genesis. If the psalm was your introduction to the Bible, count that was a good thing, since it deals in metaphors, as does the passage from John's Gospel. A lot of us can recite Psalm 23 from memory without realizing it. That's because the metaphors are memorable.

The Bible scholar James Mays wrote that in a metaphor, 'something is said to be something else that it obviously and literally is not.'¹ So, using a metaphor to describe God is a useful but maybe dangerous thing to do.

The psalm opens with a statement about commitment and trust. 'The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want.' The psalmist wants us to think not just about what shepherds do, but about what God has done and what kings are supposed to do. But is the psalmist talking about now, or is this a statement of hope for the future? There is no one single answer. Whatever is needed, the psalmist is confident that God will provide it. God alone will support, guide, and protect the psalmist's life.

The individual nature of the psalm prepares us for Gospel stories such as the one about the shepherd who leaves the flock to go find the one lost sheep (Luke 15:4). Early Christians said, 'The LORD is my shepherd,' and they meant Jesus.

Even though the lectionary plunks us down into a scene where Jesus is walking in the Temple – in the winter – the entire chapter has Jesus speaking in metaphors about the shepherd who gives his life.

First, he said, 'The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and *the sheep hear his voice*. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out' (John 10:2-3).

Further on, he said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (10:11). That seems pretty direct.

Then he said, four verses later, ‘I am the good shepherd. *I know my own and my own know me*, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And *I lay down my life for the sheep*. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be *one flock, one shepherd*. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father’ (10:14-18).

These words divided those who heard them. Some said, ‘He has a demon! Why listen to him?’ But others said, ‘Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’

That leads to today’s passage, and when Jesus says, ‘The Father and I are one,’ they again pick up stones to stone him because they felt he was making himself God. That begs the question, what kind of Messiah did they want him to be?

Reading the chapter as a whole, we can see that these people are adversaries. They are not all that open to understanding who Jesus really is. Maybe they have forgotten all the shepherd imagery found in Scripture. More likely, they don’t like ambiguous answers, which is too bad, because their God once spoke from a burning bush, saying, metaphorically and cryptically, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ Jesus spoke in parables.

We desire plain speaking. Unless we’ve known someone for a long time, and therefore know their manner of speech and know how to tell when they are kidding versus when they are being serious or evasive, we operate best when people speak to us without ambiguity. By the same token, people prefer simple answers.

The trouble is, it’s hard to talk plainly about complex topics.

In our schools, we teach that at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, an armistice ended – sort of – the First World War, and that’s it.

But the armistice only came about after a series of decisions, discussions, negotiations, telegrams, and diplomacy, all carried out over just a few days. It took five telegrams back and forth just to figure out the date, time, and place to sign the agreement. Eventually, England, France, and the United States presented their terms to the German government in thirty-five precisely worded clauses. A few had notes attached which clarified their meaning in even more detail. And it was actually signed at five in the morning, coming into effect at 11:00. I didn’t know any of that until yesterday.

In hindsight, a little more time given to talking it through, explaining a few clauses in clearer terms, with perhaps a little compassion thrown in, might have saved a lot of pain twenty years later.

If ending a war is difficult, we can see how difficult it is to talk about God.

There is nothing plain or simple about God. Someone once said that when someone starts speaking with ‘unequivocal certainty’ about God, that’s a sign that that person is no longer talking about God. Arguing about who believes the right things about God only gets us tangled up in words *about* God, not about walking (humbly) *with* God.

Psalm 23 is a very personal psalm. Several years ago, I presided over a funeral for a young man who had left behind a wife and daughter. Before we read the psalm together, I asked everyone to note any word or phrase that stood out for them as they read. For one man, it was ‘Comfort.’

For me, it’s where ‘I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.’ I go through it and come out the other side. That’s the King James version. The New Revised Standard Version translates this as, ‘I walk through the darkest valley.’ That’s not enough for me. Anybody can walk through a dark valley. Walking through the valley of the shadow of death – that implies perseverance, strength, a way that must be walked. Enemies may threaten us, but we trust in our faith and in the promise of salvation. When we get through the valley of the shadow of death, we’re different.

Resurrection is transformation, not bodily resuscitation. Jesus was crucified, died, and was raised up from the grave. On that Easter morning, none of the disciples he encountered recognized him at first. He was different to them. It was only in the breaking of bread that they finally saw him as the risen Christ, and in that moment, they realized that their lives had been touched by God. Just as it was for Peter and the disciples on the beach, we remember that to be near to God is to be fed.

When Christians read Psalm 23, Jesus is the shepherd. Jesus is the one who restores our souls, who is with us through every danger. He is the one who leads us along the path of right living. It is Jesus who welcomes us at the Table prepared for us. Jesus the shepherd, who is one with God, is with us our whole life long, forever.

Amen.

¹ James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 115.