

Sermon: Who Cares for the Sheep?

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Psalm 23**; **1 John 3:16-24**; **John 10:11-18**

Today's readings are all wrapped up in shepherd imagery and metaphor. Psalm 23, perhaps the best-known text in Hebrew Scripture, leads the way.

There is also a thread we can tug on and pull in each of today's three readings, and it's all about love – God's love; and in how we know it.

We all just read Psalm 23 from the King James version and we chose that version for several reasons: it's the version most familiar to us; it's eloquent; and it's got style. This version may be closer to the original Hebrew than many modern-day translations, and it has its ups and downs, but no translation can be 100% accurate. It's always worthwhile to see how other versions handle a given reading, plus you know how I like to go on about different translations.

So, here are a few verses in the psalm that deserve comment.

First, it's not 'the darkest valley,' as our pew Bibles would have it, nor is it 'the valley of death.' It is 'the valley of the *shadow* of death,' as the KJV has it. A Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, dating a few hundred years before Jesus, reads, 'in the midst of the shadow of death.' The point is, it's not death but death's shadow. Death has not yet come but its shadow lurks above the faithful, and since it is not Death itself, our journey may continue on; we can move forward and through the valley and fear no evil.

And speaking of evil, the word used by the psalmist is *harm*, not evil; evil implies something moral, but the psalmist is making a metaphor of divinely provided protection on life's dangerous journey, so, I will fear no *harm* as I travel, for God is with me.

And 'thy rod & thy staff they comfort me,' for you are armed to the teeth.

'Thou anointest my head with oil:' while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman anointed Jesus' head with oil (Mark 14:3-9), so there's an association with Jesus there.

The KJV and the NRSV agree when the psalmist says, ‘Surely *goodness* and *mercy* shall *follow* me all the days of my life.’ The NIV, our other pew Bible version, reads ‘goodness and *love*.’

The JPS version reads, ‘*Only* goodness and *steadfast love* shall *pursue* me all the days of my life.’ The Greek translation mentioned earlier is called the Septuagint and it reads, ‘And your mercy pursues me all the days of my life.’ Mercy only, no goodness. Now, *mercy* means getting what you don’t deserve, and I know that *hesed* is Hebrew for ‘steadfast love,’ which to me is a long way from *mercy*, so, I thought, what’s up?

Then I found out that because *hesed* is often active, it’s usually translated as *mercy*, *kindness*, or even *loving-kindness*, but none of these fully convey that ‘*hesed* acts out of unswerving loyalty even to the most undeserving.’¹ So, God’s steadfast love includes mercy.

And here’s the best part: God’s goodness and steadfast love will not just follow us or pursue us; it will literally track us down. In fact, God’s goodness is everywhere before we even arrive at a particular place. It has already been where we are planning to go. Good things don’t happen to us just because we’ve arrived. God’s goodness goes ahead of us and waits for us.

And God’s mercy, that steadfast love, follows and pursues, tracking us, picking up after us, so to speak, no matter what we’ve done. And we’re in between the two.

How do we know God’s love? By God’s actions: from engineering the Hebrews’ escape from Egypt to sending Jesus into the world; and through Jesus who lay down his life for us and therein changed the world.

Action reveals the test of love – think of soldiers dying in order to save their comrades, or parents who would do anything for the sake of their children, or even Romeo & Juliet, who loved each other to the end.

In his letter, John wrote, ‘We ought to lay down our lives for one another.’ He also wrote, ‘Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.’

Speaking up or speaking out can be risky, but, these days, no one is really willing to be burned at the stake for their opinion. On the other hand, people are still willing to lose everything by sticking up for someone in the name of a cause, or for their faith. Perhaps what John intends is to call those who *can* to open their hearts to those who *need*.

That doesn't mean we should take on the entire world – we can't – but we can help those brothers and sisters in need around us right now.

Psalm 23 reflects a deeply personal journey with God. The writer shifts from talking *about* God to talking *with* God.

The psalm would have been known to Jesus. It was Jesus' prayer before it was ours, so how might it have shaped his prayer life? What if we hear Jesus pray as the one who trusts God the Father as *his* shepherd, as *his* leader and guide? Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd...just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (John 10:14-15).

Jesus is our good shepherd because God is his. As God led Jesus, so Jesus leads us. What is true for Jesus is true for us. Jesus the good shepherd said, "I lay down my life for the sheep, and I lay it down of my own accord." It's a choice to lay down your life for the sheep. For John, laying down our lives for one another is an everyday commandment for ordinary Christians.

And this is where we become shepherds to others. This is where we can care for the sheep too.

When we allow God's steadfast love to orient us toward the needs of others, we are laying down our lives. When we live a life of sacrificial love, that is the starting point of a new life in Christ. You may have heard the saying, 'Jesus Saves.' It's true, and it happens when we become more like him.

John pointed out God's commandment that 'we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another' (1 John 3:23). It's a singular commandment; we cannot believe in Jesus without believing in love, and we cannot love without action.

The world around us may challenge our faith, and it may judge us by its own standards, but God judges us by what's in our hearts, and by the content of our character, as MLK, Jr. once said.

God knows our hearts better than we do. If we live by God's rules, by love and for others, we'll find a place at the Lord's Table, where his cup will overflow into ours, and where God's lavish hospitality will provide more than enough for all of us.

Amen.

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¹ https://ourrabbijesus.com/articles/hesed_love_long_term/, accessed 21 April 2021.