

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadows of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Psalm 23

"I Took You From the Pasture"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

Last week, the Apostle John closed his gospel on a beautiful spring morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the risen Jesus hosting a breakfast of roasted fish on toasted bread, only few weeks after the resurrection. And he chose that occasion to pull aside Simon Peter for a heart to heart talk about love and loyalty and shepherding. Now the first two of those topics might have been expected, love and loyalty were certainly at stake between Jesus and Peter in their first heart to heart after Peter had denied Jesus three times on the night before the Cross. But the love Peter felt for Christ can be seen and felt in everything Simon did that morning, hurling himself into water to get to Jesus first, pulling the net out of the sea and the fish out of the net at Jesus' command. Peter was stung that Jesus asked him three times, and declared his love for Jesus each time he was asked.

All that was predictable. But Jesus' response to Peter's declarations of love was a little less expected, "*Feed my lambs.*" Jesus told the big fisherman. "*Tend my sheep....Feed my sheep,*" Jesus commanded him. Jesus had always spoken to Peter about fishing before, "*Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*" were Jesus' opening words to Peter and John both, years before. But now Jesus was calling Peter, and I think the rest of the disciples, to something different. Shepherding was a task of a different order than simply casting a net over the side and hoping the fish would swim where your boat was steering.

Shepherding involves gaining the trust of a flock of living creatures to the point where they will answer your call, follow your lead, accept your correction. Gail Galfo spoke last week about Jesus handing Peter a crozier, a word I associate with my own Catholic upbringing. Years ago, I was confirmed by a Catholic bishop who carried a gold metal replica of a shepherd's staff, which in Jesus' day would have been a long walking stick half again as tall as the shepherd who carried it, with a crook on the end for those emergencies when some lamb or ewe or ram needed to be pulled back from some sort of danger or mischief.

Of course on that morning, Jesus didn't hand Peter a medieval bishop's crozier, or even a shepherd's walking staff. As Gail pointed out, he wasn't asking Peter to go take up life on a farm. Rather, Jesus was evoking that picture that has always lived in peoples' minds that human leadership involves winning the same sort of trust and respect and dependence that a good shepherd evokes from a flock. "*Feed my lambs,*" Jesus told Simon. Be that attentive, nurturant person who understands lambs, the immature and weak and vulnerable in the flock and gets them somewhere good to eat before they lose stamina and patience and confidence.

"*Tend my sheep.*" Jesus taught Peter. Flocks by nature are multidimensional. The big strong rams want to move fast and can't understand why the smaller, weaker among them balk and hesitate and fail. Some sheep must be stirred into motion, others must be restrained from veering out into territory where danger lives too close and the shepherd is too far away. Sheep need to be stirred and led and stopped... and knowing when to do what is more an art than a science. And leading people involves the same sort of calculation with the result that ancient kings, beginning 800 years before David, considered themselves shepherds and their people were their flocks. Hammurabi, the first great Babylonian emperor, said as much in the days of Abraham.

And nowhere was this model of thinking about leadership more prominent than in old Israel. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all shepherds, living in tents and leading the sheep in an annual journey to where pastures were fresh and moist according to season and weather. And their lives and their families depended on whether the sheep were alive and well and wooly come shearing season. So Moses had the ancient equivalent of a PhD in government, but he didn't learn to lead till God exiled him into the desert where his father-in-law's sheep taught him more about leadership than he learned in 4 decades growing up in Pharaoh's palace.

David had seven older brothers, some of them combat veterans with command experience, all of them big and strong and compelling, but God made the prophet Samuel wait, God held up the coronation banquet, because God wanted the runt of the litter, an apprentice shepherd who had missed the banquet to be out where his sheep were, God wanted David to be king. And God was willing to wait, God waited forty years for Moses. Years later, when David finally got near combat, he volunteered for a suicide mission and they couldn't find a set of armor small enough to fit him. But that was ok, David told them, because all those years protecting all those sheep, David had found a weapon to take down big game, a leather sling shot with stones.

After all, combat is so much easier once the big bad guy has taken a head shot. It was a lesson his musclebound older brothers hadn't taken the time to learn, hadn't needed to know, so big and strong were they in all that armor. But David needed to know, because for years his sheep had depended on him to discourage big, bad predators that no warrior was going to stop with shield and sword. Shepherding isn't about being big and strong and dominant and impressive. Shepherding is repetitive, time consuming, and humbling. The Twenty Third Psalm is a song David wrote about starting as a shepherd and winding up a king.

And first thing he sings about leadership is that to be a shepherd you need to have a Shepherd. His majesty the King of Israel sings about himself: *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."* In other words, you can count on me, because I can count on him. *"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."* In other words, I will take care of you, because he has taken care of me. *"He restores my soul."* David goes on. We want to think that the verb *"restore"* here is about healing, and renewal, but the Hebrew verb David uses here more often means *"return...bring back...straighten out."*

I think it means, *"He sets my soul straight."* And David goes on to sing *"He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."* And the point here seems to be that human leaders can be trusted to greater or lesser extents. David has no illusions about being any sort of perfect man. The history he allowed to be written about himself would make such an assertion ridiculous on its face. What David's saying about shepherds and leaders is that to the extent they answer to God they can be trusted. Human leaders earn the respect and trust of others only to the extent that we trust and respect God ourselves.

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." David confronted danger and death, grief and sorrow, guilt and shame in amounts that would crush most of us if we had to face it. God never made anything easy for David, nor did David ever get away with anything. But the flip side of that coin was that David was never alone. He lost his way, but God always found him, always brought him back. He suffered terrible losses, and enjoyed wonderful blessings. He hosted fabulous meals with enemies at table, plenty to eat and drink.

But the fact that held him together was that his Shepherd loved him and got him through it all with the sort of blessings that always, ever outweighed the heartbreak. And the reason it should matter to us is that a thousand years later, Jesus would live his life on exactly the same principle David sang about. Jesus was the Good Shepherd because he himself had a Shepherd, his Father. We can trust Jesus because, more than David, better than David, because Jesus loved and trusted and followed his Shepherd through the valleys and the shadows. The guilt and shame Jesus bore was David's and ours, the suffering he endured belonged to David and us. He was the Perfect Lamb in his Father's care, and he became that human Shepherd we can absolutely trust to love and forgive and save us.