

Following the Good Shepherd

Psalm 23 is probably the most recognized and popular of the psalms. We often hear it read at funerals or in hospital rooms when someone is very sick. Some parents read it to their children at bedtime. It is a psalm that imagines the God of the universe as a shepherd – and the writer of the psalm imagines himself as one of the sheep under the care of this effective and tender shepherd. According to this psalm, the shepherd sees to the needs of the sheep, brings them to places of rest and refreshment, revives and guides them, protects them, feeds them, and blesses them. Instead of wolves and lions pursuing the sheep, it is the shepherd's goodness and mercy that pursues them.

We return over and over to this psalm for its capacity to comfort and reassure us, for its promise that God loves and cares for us even in the midst of circumstances that feel clouded with darkness or the threat of death. This psalm recognizes the abundance of provision that we find in God when we allow ourselves to receive what God is perpetually offering to us: rest, refreshment, food, protection, guidance, blessing, and renewal.

Jesus proclaimed, "I am the good shepherd," speaking to an audience that, like us, would have been very familiar with this psalm. And since his audience at that moment consisted of religious leaders they would also have been familiar

with the prophet Ezekiel who had described the self-serving leaders of his time as shepherds who fed and looked after themselves instead of feeding and protecting the sheep, allowing the sheep to become scattered and to become prey to other animals. Ezekiel records this speech, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..." This passage in Ezekiel is very similar to the psalm in the way it imagines God's commitment to the sheep. But Jesus took this image even farther and said, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

As Ezekiel and Jesus both pointed out, sheep are at risk of wolves as well as hired hands who will care for them only when it is convenient. But the good shepherd cares more about the livelihood of the sheep than about preserving his own life. So deep is his dedication that he is concerned not only with the immediate surrounding flock, but with sheep that are in far flung regions. He is committed to gather all sheep into one flock, under one, good, shepherd. For this reason, he lays down his life, and takes it up again. He is not taken by surprise, he is not victimized, he intentionally lays down his life as one who has the power to lay it down and also to take it back up. For this reason, we are in good hands. Jesus is neither a self-serving nor a kind but ineffectual shepherd merely

overcome by wolves. He is the shepherd who walked straight into a pack of wolves and rescued all past, present, and future sheep through his incomprehensible act of dying and resurrecting. He is the shepherd who then explained that the sheep too would be resurrected; their death would also be transformed.

This is an important truth for the writer of 1 John. The actions of the good shepherd reveal to us the very nature of love, and the path of love that we can step into because resurrection awaits us as well. He writes, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” For the writer of this letter, love is not merely something we make known through words. Love requires honesty and action. We love when we do what our words profess. We love when we act justly and with true regard for others.

The writer says, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” He might also say, “How does God’s love abide in those of us who find protection under the law, but refuse to help when our brothers and sisters are denied the same protections?”

I wonder what happens for you as you hear those words. I notice my own body clench. I feel some rise in anxiety. I start to wonder how I measure up at this work of loving and taking action in the face of injustice. We live in a culture that expects mastery and goodness. We even think we are supposed to master goodness – to somehow be excellent at doing the right thing at all times. Sadly, that often leads us astray instead of motivating the kind of love 1 John is talking about. And I think that is why we are asked to read these texts now, during the season of Easter, and not in Lent when we might be tempted to brood or self-flagellate.

The writer of 1 John knows that sheep can't lead themselves into green pastures and toward still waters. They need a shepherd. They need a shepherd who models the way and who works with them as they grow into shepherd like behaviors themselves. They need to know resurrection as a reality, for that to sink into them and bring them courage. They need to learn the way the shepherd's voice speaks within them. The writer of 1 John says over and over again that the answer to living well is to abide in God, to know ourselves as children of God and to abide in the love that we are offered. When we abide there, we learn the patterns of love and naturally grow into loving acts. To abide is to slip into the rhythms of the good shepherd, to know ourselves so loved, fed,

protected, blessed, and renewed that we naturally extend those same benefits to others.

The love being described is not a codependent form of niceness that enables another person's addiction or pathology. It's not a love that is without boundaries, or a love that depends on another person or group to assure us that we are good and loving people. It is a quiet, confident love that comes from being loved and set free to move through the world in relationship with others.

The love being described is also not about becoming some kind of knight on a white horse, rescuing people we perceive to be needy or helpless. It is about coming alongside and partnering with others and being humble enough to learn from them. In the case of police violence against people of color, many of us are discovering that the work of loving our neighbor sometimes starts with being willing to listen to their stories, to reading parts of American history that we weren't taught in school, to cease protecting ourselves from uncomfortable conversations, and to risk dialogues that we haven't yet mastered. For most white people this is the laying down of our lives that truly serves our brothers and sisters. There is other work to do that involves changing laws and hiring practices and engaging in peaceful protest, but it all begins from a place of knowing ourselves so perfectly loved by God that we can risk laying down our maintained

comfort and our areas of mastery to enter the difficult realities faced by others and to become learners ourselves.

When we abide in God, we learn the rhythms of love, and we take risks on behalf of our brothers and sisters. Here is where I want to acknowledge that some members of our congregation, as people of color, have been living in this space with incredible graciousness. You have had to navigate your own heartache and rage alongside the minimization of your reality. You have leaned into ways of loving people who have distrusted you, ignored you, blamed you, sometimes attacked you or those close to you. You have encountered harm and chosen to walk the path of love anyway. Many of us are grateful for your grace and strength, for your wisdom and for the foundation you have laid for this season of racial reckoning. You have learned to abide with a God who laid down his life and took it back up again, and you have shown those of us who are white an extraordinary, radical kindness.

Let us, then, abide in God and discover how to lay down our lives for one another so that all of us may encounter the resurrection available to us in this life as well as the next. No matter what, we are assured of God's commitment to love us and to bring us back to life, so let us love with abandon.

Let us follow the path of the good shepherd.