
Part of the flock
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Psalm 23, John 10:1-10, and Acts 2:42-47

This week, Marjorie told me I should preach a comforting sermon. So you can imagine how delighted I was to have those readings from the lectionary. Because our readings are about sheep, and shepherds, and the good shepherd. Our readings include the very classic 23rd Psalm. “The lord is my shepherd”. That Psalm is used at practically every funeral I perform. Which makes me think that people must find it comforting. Now I do not want to take away any of the comforting bits of that psalm. But when we read it outside the context of a funeral service, a few questions do pop up.

[image: sheep can't knit]

What I have always found odd about the psalm is that in the first paragraph, the claim is made that God makes the sheep lie down in green pastures. That's a friendly image. But in the second paragraph there is a reference to “even though I walk through the darkest valley”. But hang on a minute. We were just in a green pasture. How did we get to a dark Vally? Did we choose to leave a green pasture and stray into a dark, scary place? Did the pasture change into a dark place all by itself? Did we make a bad decision somewhere along the way? What happened? If we found ourselves in a green pasture, why did we leave it?

[image: sheep taking a bath]

Well, this week I completely failed to find any sensible explanation about what the author of the 23rd psalm likely had in mind. But I do have some insights about the imagery that is used. And I think the traditional Christian way of viewing the psalm needs a bit of an upgrade.

Part of the problem is that here in Canada we have adopted a very European view of this imagery. And a very European sense of what shepherds, sheep, and pastures look like. That's very natural of course. But in this case, I believe it has also taken us a long way from the original context.

[image: green pasture in Europe]

For example, here is an image of what most of us probably think of when we hear the term “green pasture”. It’s green. It’s a pasture. What’s not to like, right?

[image: green pasture 2]

And here’s a green pasture with sheep on it.

[image: green pasture 3]

And another one. It looks truly delightful, right? It looks like a place we might choose for a picnic. It looks like a comforting place. A place of calm and peace.

[image: Jesus pasture 1]

And here is an artists rendering of Jesus as the good shepherd. It’s a very typical image. We have a very white Jesus (also a leftover from European thinking). And of course, Jesus is helping a small sheep. And look at the pasture itself. Lots of long, lush grasses very similar to the photos I just showed.

[image: Jesus pasture 2]

Or how about this one. Again, a very white Jesus is carrying a small sheep. The sheep looks like a pet. In this image, not only do we have luscious grasses for the sheep to eat, we even have a river to provide clean drinking water. This image includes everything that the sheep could possibly need. Food, water, a shepherd. It’s a complete package. It’s very comforting, right? The sheep have everything they need at hand. They do not need to change, or leave that spot, or move around. They just have to graze and be content. Everything they need is right there. The sheep can live their whole lives right there.

[image: happy sheep]

That image - and others like it - have given us a particular view of the Good Shepherd, and therefore also, of God. And perhaps even a particular view of what it means to be one of the sheep. In short summary: we have Jesus as our shepherd, and so we have what we need for the rest of our lives. We do not have to move, or change, or disturb the status quo. If we are faithful to the shepherd, we do not need to make any big effort ourselves, right? This is such a comforting image, even Rev. Paul cannot mess this up.

However, these images are precisely where our European perspective somehow nudges us in perhaps a strange direction. Because the phrase “green pasture” in Palestine means something a little bit different. Here’s a photo of a “green pasture” in Palestine.

[image: green pasture in Palestine]

Most of the year, this is what “green pasture” looks like in Palestine. This was what “green pasture” looked like when the author of the 23rd psalm wrote “God makes me lie down in green pastures”. No, there is nothing wrong with this photo. I have not used Photoshop to remove all of the green. This is an authentic photo of a green pasture in Palestine.

This is a pasture for sheep to graze on. Those horizontal tracks that you see are made by sheep. One observer commented that tracks are spaced so that sheep on each track can graze up and down the slope and the entire pasture will be covered. But do you see any green? Do you see anything to eat?

[image: shepherding in palestine]

Here’s another image. It shows a shepherd literally leading a flock of sheep. The shepherd is on the right. And you can tell that the sheep are actually grazing. Many of them have their heads down because they are eating something. Are they eating rocks? It really looks like there is nothing for them to eat. However, if you saw this image on a better screen, you would notice a slight hint of green in many parts in the image.

[image: single green shoot]

What the sheep are eating are these green shoots. There is very limited moisture so these shoots only appear sporadically (both temporally and spatially). But they are green. They are edible. They sustain life.

[image: palestinian shepherd on horse]

This image shows a shepherd on a horse. And from this angle we can see that these green shoots are there. But they are there in small clumps and are very spaced out. This is nothing like the vast meadows that we normally think of when we think of “green pastures”.

[image: contrast European view vs Palestinian view]

So, the European way to read the 23rd psalm is about how everything we need is

close at hand, as long as we listen to the shepherd. The sheep do not have to make any real effort, or change in any way. But the Palestinian - and more biblical - way to read the 23rd psalm is about how by following the shepherd we get what we need. But we only get what we need right now. We get one bite of food at a time. We get one bite of food and then we have to move on. Later, we get another bite. We do not see a secure future all mapped out for us ahead of time. We get what we need one bite at a time with no security that our long-term needs will be met.

And which of these images resonates with you when you consider the ways in which God has cared for you throughout your life? Do you think that faith means that everything is rainbows and unicorns, food aplenty with no real effort or worries? Or do you think that faith means that life can be a struggle, that we have no guarantees beyond the moment that you have right now, and yet you know that you are cared for. You know that you are not alone.

I'd love to hear your own interpretation of these images and how they resonate with your faith over coffee time today - or anytime.

[image single green shoot]

I think that many of us resonate with the idea that right now we have a single bite of food - or whatever it is that we need right now. But then we have to move, change, grow, and then later we will get what we need later.

That is what happened in our story from Acts 2 this morning. The story is about a community of faith not too long after Jesus had headed for the heavens. This community focused on what the apostles had taught them. And they lived in the moment. They sold their possessions in order to share what they had. And because they shared what they had, their little community grew.

But what do you make of that story? Do you think those people were nuts? Do you think those people were simply nicer than we are? Probably not. The community in question was waiting for Jesus to return. And they believed that Jesus would return very soon. Very soon. Like later-this-week soon. Like perhaps-it-is-not-even-worth-putting-on-the-kettle soon. They believed that Jesus would return before they had time to spend all their money. So for them there was no down-side to giving everything away. Because

very soon, they would have use for money anyway.

They were living in the moment, like a sheep that focuses on the single green shoot in front of them, unconcerned about any long-term future. Unconcerned about the next minute, let alone the next day.

[image: large sheep]

The sheep in Palestine, and that small community that followed Jesus, did not worry about security in the way we understand the term today. Today we all need to think of our security. Whether we are trying to get a job, or working so that our retirement funds will not give out before we ourselves give out. Security (and therefore, insecurity) are features of modern living. The imagery of the 23rd psalm and the image of a small community sharing everything in common are hard to imagine today and even harder to live into. And perhaps we should not even try. Because our need for security is real.

[image: sheep and cat]

And perhaps that is the big takeaway from all these stories. That we need to recognize the tension in our lives between our very real need for security and our very real need to share with others. Neither extreme works. Today, we cannot share everything to the point that we end up living on the street. And we cannot aim for such personal security that we isolate ourselves and do not share with each other.

This long preamble has made me realize that the stories in the Bible about sheep, and shepherds, and the good shepherd are all comforting. But all of these stories seem to ignore one key detail. And what all of those stories ignore is perhaps where we can truly find comfort today.

What those stories all ignore is ... the flock. The community. Sure, the reading in Acts included community, but a very short-term community with no need for security beyond the next few days. That is not where we find ourselves today.

Where is the hope in this? The hope is in the flock. The collective. Or in modern language, the community. The biblical stories we read today focused on the sheep as individuals. But what about the gift of our community. What about the flock?

Incidentally, when I speak with people outside this congregation, I refer to you collectively as “the flock”. I mean, with a last name of “shepherd” what else would you

expect.

And who is part of this flock? Well in my mind, you all are. If you think you belong, then you belong. If you want to belong, then you belong. And I appreciate the gift that we are to each other as part of the flock.

I have to tell you that I do not resonate with the image of the flock of sheep on the European green pasture. Where we already have what we need and we can sit back and feel entitled.

Instead, I resonate with the image of the flock of sheep on the Palestinian green pasture. There is enough for everyone - if we all share. And instead of feeling entitled, we feel grateful. We feel grateful for each mouthful that we get. And we feel grateful to be part of the flock. We feel grateful for the presence of each other. We appreciate each other in deep ways.

And the flock does not have a master plan all figured out. We travel from green shoot to green shoot. We live in the moment. We appreciate the present moment. And we do that together.

That's my image of the flock. The flock bring life to the idea ... expressed in our creed That we are not alone.

You are part of the flock.

[image: single sheep]

You are not alone.

[image: ewe are not alone]

Ewe are not alone.

Amen.