

“God is Good, All the Time”
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St. Martin’s Episcopal Church
Lebanon, OR 97355

Today's psalm and gospel reading draws our minds and heart to the image of God and in turn Jesus as the Shepherd. There is no better image of Jesus.

The picture of the shepherd is woven into the language and imagery of the Bible. It is so easily understood by the people of that time as Judaea was a central plateau stretching 35 miles from Bethel to Hebron and 17 miles across. Judaea was more pastoral than agricultural and so the shepherd was everywhere to be seen.

This image is found throughout the Psalms and then in Isaiah and Song of Solomon and Jeremiah to mention only a few. In the culture of the time sheep were raised much more for their wool than meat, and they were led in small groups by their shepherd for years and hence they were named: brown legs, gimpy, etc. Hence they were known intimately by the Shepherd and they likewise knew the shepherd and found safety and security when within the range of his voice.

But there is more to the image of the Shepherd. Walter Bruggeman, an Old Testament theologian says the Shepherd in Biblical terms is also a political term that equates to KING, Sovereign Lord, the Authority, the one who directs, the one to whom I am answerable and the One whom I serve and trust. From this point of view then: The Lord is my Shepherd, the first line of the Psalm declares that if the Lord, Yahweh, is our sovereign then he has no rival, he is our Lord, he has claimed us, we are his, the sheep of his pasture as one scripture says. As such we are called to let nothing else, no other claim jumpers or allegiances get in the way: not people, economics, politics, sexism, racism, being liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat: Indeed no other loyalties are to seduce us away from our allegiance to Jesus as our Lord and Shepherd. He is the only one to whom we give homage, allegiance and put all our trust in.

The Lord is my Shepherd: This one, this Lord, the Shepherd, we are reminded is the creator of the world, the one who is behind all of creation of earth and the cosmos. This one whose essence of love permeates everything and everyone and reveals again and again that nothing can separate us from his love and guiding spirit. Indeed he is the one who nurtures us, provides for us, sustains us, revives us and guides us. Why? For his name sake:

Because to care for us brings God joy, it is God's desire to ensure our wellbeing and give us access to his unfathomable love through the revelation of that love in Jesus giving of himself that we might be freed to receive and live in and out of that love. God's desire is that all might find their true selves, creatures infused with God and made in God's image, revealed and nurtured.

But don't get sentimental, and think all will be rosy when we come under the tutelage of the Shepherd. Scripture through her writers doesn't sugar coat the reality of life. Our foremothers and fathers saw things as they are, that our lives are lived in a broken, confusing and violent world. One that Jesus himself chose to enter to allow us to see that all things can be overcome in God's purposes. The scriptures do not say IF I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death, But Though I walk, or when I walk, through the valley of death He is with me. None of us are exempt from life's turmoils, or entitled to a pain free life. Life is not all green pastures, loaded tables with overflowing cups and accolades from others. There are truly oases, places of rest, in an otherwise barren countryside that we have all experienced at times. Yet we like all people created in God's image struggle with our personal and communal valleys and shadows of death. We all feel overwhelmed and defeated at times.

These valley experiences may be valleys of our own making, perhaps we began in green pastures but through drugs, status seeking, materialism, alcoholism we have lost our way. Or perhaps our valley experience comes through things outside our control: an accident, poverty, the place where we were born, the color of our skin, our genetic makeup, the lack of educational or occupational opportunity, violence or neglect. Whatever the situation we find ourselves experiencing the valley of oppression and fear and perhaps even death.

Actually, we are now all experiencing such a valley, this one has been caused by an itty bitty virus bug called Corona. This bug has turned our world upside

down and appears to have the power to do so for months if not year to come. It is a not so subtle reminder that we indeed can not control much of anything. It is taking lives, it is changing how the whole world is living, it is driving many into physical and financial crisis or ruin, and leaving multitudes fearful and angry. People are lost, losing hope, overcome by the suddenness of death and the feelings of impotence, having little to ground them or give them a sense of a future Yet the more we find ourselves responding with anger and fear, the more threatened we feel, then the more we sink into black and white thinking, we begin to become rigid and protective, living from an “us and them” mentality closing ourselves off rather than recognizing, embracing and identifying with our a communal suffering and reaching out in our shared humanity with the light of Christ and the promise of guidance and presence even in this valley.

But even here God goes before us. God creates an opening in the otherwise fenced off area. Shows us the way though, declares that this is not the end we need not be without hope for He is with us. He allows a way for us to move back and forth finding hope in despair, light in darkness, and life out of death. He offers liberation not exclusion. He invites us to follow him. We are asked to believe and declare that when we are in a scary place we can trust and know the Shepherd has not abandoned us that we will again, in time, be led back to a restful place. We are called even in the midst of doubt to proclaim that God will cover us with his grace and love, and we are not alone even in the mist of the turbulence, upheaval, and unforeseen heartbreaking trauma we are experiencing. And in the midst of that suffering he reveals himself to us. Albert Schweitzer in the “Quest for the Historical Jesus” said

“God comes to us as the one unknown, without a name - He comes to those who know him not. He speaks the same words “follow me” and sets us to tasks which he has to fulfil in our times. He commands, and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and in an ineffable majesty they shall learn through their own experience who He is”.

Is our task in this time to trust the shepherd and in so doing model for our fearful and overwhelmed world the love of God which has no end? To follow the one who calls us by name, and when we enter the dark valley trust that we are being led by our shepherd.

Then for a final story:

“ A dramatist of a century ago traveled America from coast to coast. He studied theater and was a skilled speaker. He always concluded his performance by quoting a passage of scripture. This evening he chose the 23rd Ps. The audience had never heard the Psalm read so eloquently, and each phrase couched with perfect intonation and nuances and when he had finished with “and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” the audience jumped to their feet giving him a standing ovation. While applauding - an old man in the back shuffled unnoticed to the front and walked up on stage and said to the Dramatist “Mind if I say the 23rd Ps.” Taken aback the Dramatist said “Go Ahead”

With a cracked voice he began “ The Lord is my Shepherd”, his words were choppy and uneven....”I shall not want”.... He went through to the end and then turned and shuffled off the stage. But when he had finished there were no sounds of applause, no ovation.... Indeed there was deafening silence throughout the auditorium. Then some sniffing and some lowered heads.

The dramatist looked at these persons with moist eyes and bowed heads and turned to the old man....” What did you do? You didn’t read the Ps as well as I did, yet I have never seen an audience so moved. How did you do it?” “Son”, said the old man, “you know the Psalm....but I know the shepherd.”

The man in this story summed it up. It is knowing the depth of God's love and recognizing the voice of our shepherd when he calls that is the real issue for us all. That is the whole message of the gospel; Whatever comes, or befalls us, God, the sovereign Lord, the creator of all that is seen and unseen, has created us, has infused his being, love and essence within us and seeks to journey intimately with us through life; the mountain top experiences and yes, even the shadowy deathly valleys. And we can rest in this because indeed:

*God is good all the time,
All the time God is good.*