

Ezekiel 34: 1-16
Psalm 23
John 10: 1-18

Super Abundance
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“The Lord is my shepherd.” The twenty third Psalm is probably the best known passage in the whole Bible. Like many of the really well known passages, its very familiarity strips it of any surprise value and it just kind of slides in one ear and out the other, almost unheard at times. But it obviously has resonated with its listeners over the years, or it would never have become so popular. There are two ways we react to these old chestnuts of Scripture. One is to say, “King James Only!” because that version is so rich and stately, so well designed for reading aloud. And I totally get that. The other is to say, “How can we word this so that we hear it all over again?” And I totally get that too. The musician Bobbi McFerrin sings a rhyming version of the Psalm that goes:

The Lord is my Shepherd, I have all I need,
She makes me lie down in green meadows,
Beside the still waters, She will lead.

Another paraphrase, written by Eugene Petersen for his translation of Scripture called “The Message” goes:

God, my shepherd!
I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.

Years ago I heard the retired Unitarian pastor Mounir Sa'adah read his own version at a funeral:

Love is my Shepherd, I shall not want.
Love makes me to lie down in green pastures. And then...
Love prepares a place for me in the presence of my enemies;
Love anoints my head with oil; my cup overflows with Love.

All this is an attempt to get us to listen to the old, familiar words, the old familiar promises, the old familiar expressions of faith. The Psalmist, writing in Hebrew, perhaps as much as 3000 years ago, was using his or her language and word pictures to express trust, security, protection, and abundance – gifts received in abundance from a loving God. It was not about just getting enough green pasture or enough still water or enough rest or enough in the cup. It was about divine generosity going to extremes – from the depths of the dark valley to the heights of the banquet table.

Every year, in the season after Easter, the lectionary offers us Good Shepherd Sunday, when we read the 23rd Psalm and parts of the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John. It's obvious why they are paired: the Psalmist sings, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” and Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd.” As happens so often in the Gospels, Jesus takes a title from the Hebrew Scriptures and claims it and re-interprets it. The first readers of John's Gospel would have recognized the idea of the Good Shepherd, because it was the image used for the ideal king in Israel's traditions. In their history, the king, as ruler, was meant to embody certain attributes of God. The king had a duty to be concerned with justice for the poor, to be a kind shepherd who guarded the rights of the orphans and widows, those vulnerable members of the flock. The king was a reflection of the God portrayed in Psalm 23.

When the rulers did not live up to this model, prophets would condemn them, and predict ruin for the nation...as in the reading from Ezekiel today.

So we could read the 23rd Psalm both as a devotional practice – as is so often done in worship, in times of trouble, at funerals – or we could look at it as an example of good leadership: as a model or inspiration – or we could read it to get some kind of direction for our behavior, our response. Though I love the images of still waters and right paths, I find that one phrase resonated with me this year: “My cup overflows.” This is actually a recurring theme of Scripture. God seems eager to give in excess. And Jesus echoes this in his teachings in the Gospel of John: “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” In contrast to so many who would steal and destroy, the Shepherd has only good things in store for his sheep.

Much as we love the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, much as we love the 23rd Psalm, we do **not** live as though we believe it. We have wants and hungers and fears, of course, and these things tend to direct and shepherd our lives, rather than a sense of holy security and abundance. Unfortunately, this makes us prey to forces and powers that are only too willing to exploit our fears and hungers, no matter how unreasonable they are. The creative teams in advertising firms know this. Many commercials are amusing or clever, the slogans captivating or enticing. So I listen without thinking...then I will stop and say, “What? Love is what makes a Subaru a Subaru? What?” A story is created in the commercial – one might almost say a myth – of a loving father who worries about his little girl learning to drive, and he loves her so much, and the world is so dangerous and...thank goodness. He is rescued by Subaru. Subaru is his Shepherd. Because love makes a Subaru a Subaru. Does anyone else here feel a little manipulated by that: our fears and loves being used to persuade us to buy a car?

(I have nothing against a Subaru, or that company in particular, by the way. They are doing no more and no less than provide a service we seem to want.)

We can also be the prey of political leaders who exploit our fear, our need for security, our xenophobia, and our greed to Shepherd down paths of injustice and violence. I happened to believe that our real and justified fears and grief after 9/11 were exploited by our leaders. And I do not feel safer today as a result, just more war-weary and cynical than ever. But on some level I believe that we were given just what we wanted by our leaders– a response that suited our deepest fears and needs for revenge.

When the Lord is my Shepherd or Jesus is my Good Shepherd or Jesus is the Gateway, we learn to be free of the world’s kind of manipulation and shepherding and exploitation. We allow ourselves to be governed by trust and gratitude. We view the world through another lens: not the scarcity of goodness but its abundance. We find meaning in translating the actions and words of that man into something life-giving for our time. We find belonging not in owning the best advertising has to offer, but in our willingness to share what we own with those who have less. We know that our lives of abundance are tied to other sheep: those “not of this fold.” We learn that achieving fullness of life while it is denied to everyone else is impossible. If we live with all we want while everyone around us lives with nothing, we are living in a world of broken relationship. We find that the abundant life is not an achievement: it’s a gift, built upon the love that Jesus offered, the love Jesus inspired.

Jesus is a Gate: a way into a community and out to service. Jesus is a Shepherd, calling and protecting, guiding and encouraging. A passage in the Gospel that has often been used to give a

message of exclusivity is actually a call to understand a different kind of belonging and a different kind of security. When we talk about sheep and shepherds, remember that we are talking about the deepest human needs. Jesus calls us to understand the needs of the human heart and not to be distracted or swayed by lesser concerns, lesser promises. When young people seek purpose and set goals, they need a community, a flock, that will show God's loving embrace, God's nurture, God's gathering in and leading out, God's generosity to all in need. They need to see all this not as something they must achieve, but as something they are freely given, because they are loved just as they are.

But this sheepfold, this congregation, cannot exist in a timeless, comfortable bubble. Because we and all our children are loved just as we are, God has great things in store. Abundant life is inside and outside and wherever we go. We need guidance to know that we shouldn't graze down the greenery in one pasture until there's nothing left. We cannot imprison the abundant life that Christ offers within our sheepfold because the real fullness of that life cannot fit inside a safe and comfortable enclosure. Christ leads us out, and sometimes drives us out if we are lazy sheep, so that our lives have the possibility of expanding and we can discover what abundance really is.

This sheepfold, this congregation, has a wonderful opportunity to be a place where goals are examined and questioned. Here we can discern the best use for our material wealth; where we can share our experiences of greed and need, of abundance and scarcity. We can do this because the Christ we follow offers us both the security of the sheepfold and the promise of new pastures.

What do we have to offer the world in the way of abundance? What evidence can we give that we have heard the unique voice of our Shepherd? The easy offerings are financial and material. They are worth a lot – the abundant meals we provide to Listen or Dismas House, the abundant books we hope to send to the Dominican Republic. But in some ways these are metaphors for a greater abundance of life and joy that we experience as grace from God.

During this season of Easter and springtime and exciting new endeavors, let us explore the expansive life found in resurrection times. Listen for the voice of the Shepherd calling you by name, calling you out of complacency and into new life. And give Christ the chance to lead you out – or drive you out – of the sheepfold so that you can find fullness of life, lived abundantly. Amen.