

A Love Letter

The Twenty-Third Psalm is one of the most requested psalms at funerals. It paints a pastoral image of sheep grazing, of luscious green fields, of tables overflowing with feasts eaten without fear. It speaks of dwelling in God's house; one that is a house of safety, security and companionship. A place where the eternal is discovered, and where perfect rest and restoration occur.

There are many images of shepherds in scripture; both within the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament, within Islam and Shikism there are images of God as the shepherd and we, God's people as sheep.

David, the author of the Twenty-third psalm, began his life as the youngest of eight children as a shepherd and musician. He grew up to encounter many adventures, including becoming King, and fathering twenty children.

Jesus has often been referred to as the good shepherd. One of the stories of Jesus is a parable where the shepherd leaves behind 99 sheep to search for the one who is lost. Why does the shepherd spend so much time looking for the one stray sheep? After all, aren't sheep considered stupid?

Often the word "sheep" is used as a derogatory term. Recently I have heard COVID deniers and anti-vaxxers using the term "sheep" or "sheeple" to denote those of us who are wearing masks, following the rules and getting our vaccines.

Don't sheep blindly follow one another and would follow one another of a cliff's edge? Well actually, no. Sheep are quite bright. They know the sound of their shepherd's voice. They recognize faces. They can be stubborn, and will only follow if they choose to. Also, they are noted as having a fierce kick.

I recently heard the story of Elmo, a 14 year old wethered sheep who is arthritic and was having difficulty getting up after his afternoon nap or overnight sleep. "Elmo has figured out that if he burrows sideways into a mound of waste hay, he can sleep, and he is upright. He has two mounds to choose from and we have watched him lie down. He takes his time to get it just right." (From Suzanne J. Artley, posted to Facebook)

Don and Suzanne Artley are shepherds. Suzanne shared this wonderful story recently on Facebook. My reply was that I wanted to be as smart as Elmo, her reply was she didn't think I'd want to be that old. Sheep years are 5.33 times one human year, which would make me 282 years old. My back hurts just thinking about that. No wonder Elmo's arthritic body is having difficulty standing.

Did you know that the Latin word for shepherd is pastor?

Bishops are often pictured carrying croziers, those large shepherd hook looking staves with a curved end. They can be quite plain or incredibly ornate. The image of Bishop as Shepherd is one that has been used for centuries.

Shepherding is one of the oldest professions, with domesticated sheep, used for woolen fleece, milk and meat dating back to between 11,000 and 9,000 BCE.

What we see in the images of the shepherd is one who cares deeply for their flock. One of my favourite people has always referred to his congregation as his flock. He truly sees himself as a shepherd tending to his flock of sheep. He is fiercely protective of them. He will not see any harm come to them. There are times they frustrate him, yet he would gladly give his life for them.

Does that sound familiar?

Jesus would give up his life for the one missing sheep. He wouldn't abandon the 99 other sheep, rather he would send them on their way, seek to find the lost sheep, then reunite that sheep with the rest of the herd. And while this is drawn as a parable, it is also the truth.

In short, the Twenty-Third Psalm is a love-letter.

It is a love letter from the Great Shepherd -- God, to God's flock -- us.

It is a letter that promises all the things our hearts desire...for eternity.

I have learned in my life that the opposite of hatred is love. And what most often causes hatred is fear. The Twenty-Third Psalm promises that we will feel no fear because we will not be alone. Just as the single sheep will not be alone.

This afternoon, when you have woken from your post-liturgical nap and are settling down with your bible, read the Twenty-Third Psalm.

When I was researching for today's sermon I looked up some alternative versions of the Twenty-Third Psalm. I'm going to share two with you now.

The first is called "Politically Correct Jargon Version"

The Lord and I are in a shepherd/sheep situation, and I am in a position of negative need.

He prostrates me in a green belt grazing area; he conducts me directionally parallel to non-torrential aqueous liquid.

He returns to original satisfaction levels my psychological make-up; he switches me on to a positive behavioral format for maximal prestige of his identity.

It should indeed be said that notwithstanding the fact that I make ambulatory progress through the umbrageous inter-hill mortality slot, terror-sensations will not be instantiated within me due to para-ethical phenomena.

Your pastoral walking aid and quadruped pickup unit introduce me into a pleasurific moodstate.

You design and produce a nutriment-bearing furniture-type structure in the context of non-cooperative elements.

You act out a head-related folk ritual employing vegetable extract; my beverage utensil experiences a volume crisis.

It is an ongoing deductible fact that your inter-relational empathetical and non-vengeance capabilities will retain me as their target focus for the duration of my non-death period; and I will possess tenant rights in the housing unit of the Lord on a permanently open-ended time basis.

Author unknown

This is my favourite paraphrase, from The Message

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.

True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure

You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.

Eugene Peterson, The Message, Twenty-Third Psalm

This love letter promises we will never again hunger or thirst. We will never need to fear our enemies, in fact, we will dine before them. We will be given safe lodging forever. We will never again feel tired or burned out. We will always feel God's love surrounding us and reminding us that we are, all of us, God's children.

And not only will there be plenty of food and drink, we will never again want for anything. We will, for eternity, have everything we could possibly need. No need to find places to store "stuff" because we won't need stuff. We will have the most contented life possible. And not only will it be the most contented life ever, it will be the most contented life forever.

And if that's not a love letter, then I don't know what one is.

Giving thanks to God from whom all blessings flow. Amen.

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