



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Everything I Know about Shepherds I Learned from Scripture Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

“The Lord is my shepherd” Already your minds are racing ahead, continuing the psalm: “I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters” We know that beloved psalm by heart. I learned it at my grandmother’s knee . . . and received fifty cents to boot. Whoever said religion doesn’t pay?! I think I got a better deal than my brother who had to memorize the Ten Commandments in order to earn his reward. Come to think of it, I’m not certain he ever collected!

We say the words to the Twenty-third Psalm and images flow through our minds: pastures and ponds, paths and shadows, staffs and tables, oil and overflowing cups are imprinted into our faith memory. We know what that psalm means as well as we know our own name. But why? And how do we know it? This region was once a largely agrarian culture, but that has changed significantly. I am not even certain that we have a single farmer in our congregation anymore, at least not an active one. And while there are 27,000 sheep being raised on 1,300 different farms in North Carolina,¹ we do not regularly encounter sheep crossing our roads or hear their bleating on a calm summer evening. Personally, I have never been acquainted with anyone who worked as a shepherd. I am aware that there is a young man from Rocky Mount who is shepherding somewhere in the world and some of you know him. Even so, I suspect that farming sheep these days is vastly different from the way in which young David shepherded his father’s sheep in Bethlehem thousands of years ago.

It occurred to me, then, that what I do know about shepherds does not come from any personal experience at all. I have never studied agriculture or spent time on a sheep farm. Essentially everything I know about shepherds comes almost exclusively from scripture with the chief passage being the Twenty-third Psalm. So what does scripture tell us about shepherds?

¹The American Sheep Industry Association, “Fast Facts . . . About Sheep Production in the United States,” Sources: USDA, NASS, Sheep & Goats, Jan. 31, 2014 and USDA, NASS, Farms, Land in Farms and Livestock Operations 2012 Summary, February 2013; available online at: http://www.sheepusa.org/ResearchEducation_FastFacts.

The first time the term arises in the Bible is in the story of Jacob. Jacob was the trickster son of Isaac and Rebekah, the one who cheated his brother Esau, deceived his father, and escaped to what he thought would be the safety of his Uncle Laban. After an arduous journey to the land of Haran, Jacob arrived at a well around which were scattered three flocks of sheep. Talking with the shepherds, he learned that the custom was to wait until all the flocks had arrived before rolling the heavy stone from the mouth of the well and watering their flocks. When Jacob asked if they were acquainted with a man named Laban, the men acknowledged that they knew him and pointed down a path to a young woman who was leading another flock of sheep toward them. "That is his daughter Rachel," they told him. When Rachel arrived at the well, rather than wait on the other shepherds to do their part, Jacob rolled the stone away by himself and watered the maiden's sheep. He then introduced himself as her cousin and the rest of the story began to unfold.

Thus we learn that one of the chief responsibilities of a shepherd is providing water for the flock—"he leads me beside still waters." Finding lush, green pastures and calm water for the sheep is essential. Whenever I repeat the Twenty-third Psalm, I see an image of a verdant meadow beside a quiet pond on a fresh spring day.

Back home in Canaan, Jacob was not what you would consider the outdoor type. Dealing with livestock, hunting, and the like were left to his brother Esau. Uncle Laban changed Jacob's skill set rather quickly, however, and Jacob became quite the farmer, rancher, and shepherd. In fact, it was as a shepherd that he earned the right to marry his two wives, Leah and Rachel.

We do not find the term "shepherd" again until a generation later when Jacob and his family are back in Canaan. He and Esau have reconciled, he is settled on his own estate, and his family has grown to include twelve sons, all of whom are shepherds except the youngest, Benjamin. We realize that shepherding at this time was very much a family business.

The next to the youngest son, a precocious young man named Joseph, assisted two of his older brothers. Apparently, they sometimes did things they should not have done and would have gotten away with them if their pesky younger brother had not tattled on them. Joseph, of course, paid the price. My older brothers often threatened to sell me to Gypsies or return me to wherever I came from, but Joseph's brothers actually did it! To get rid of the

Dreamer, as they called him, they sold him to some Midianite traders who were headed to Egypt.

We know that God maneuvered and managed things so that Joseph eventually became quite prominent in Egypt. Thanks to his insight and ability to interpret dreams, Joseph saved the Egyptian people and his own family from starvation during the seven year famine that plagued Egypt. Being shepherds worked to the advantage of Jacob and his sons. It seems that the Egyptians were more cowboys than shepherds. They preferred to deal with cattle and abhorred shepherds. When Pharaoh was told that Joseph's family came from a long line of shepherds, it was suggested that they be kept away from the cattle-loving Egyptians in the interior of the country and pushed up north and east into the land of Goshen. Pharaoh agreed, so Joseph's family settled near him in the best land in the nation, the land of Rameses (Genesis 46). Joseph had learned well from his father how to work a good deal.

Up to this point, the term shepherd had been applied only to humans who actually watched over sheep. When Jacob was on his deathbed, he called Joseph and his two sons to him. He blessed them saying, "The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth" (Genesis 48:15-16).

Despite all of Jacob's trickery and tragedy, God had managed to shepherd him along the way and to lead him to Egypt for safekeeping where his family could begin to fulfill the promise made to his grandfather Abraham. God watched over Jacob like a shepherd watches over that one sheep that always wants to stray.

The Hebrew people did prosper and multiply in number until the day a new Pharaoh arose who no longer knew the story of Joseph and how he saved the Egyptian people. The Hebrews posed a threat but also provided an enormous pool of skilled labor. They became the slaves of Pharaoh and life became bitter and hard for them. Finally, to curb the threat of too many Hebrew men, Pharaoh ordered all male babies to be killed. Determined to shepherd his people through whatever valley of darkness they faced, God drew the boy Moses out of the water in a scheme devised by the boy's mother. Though raised as an Egyptian, Moses knew he was a Hebrew. When he witnessed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew man, Moses killed the

Egyptian and hid his body. He fled for his life into the wilderness and found, of all things, a well! Another injustice unfolded before his eyes when a group of unkind shepherds drove away the sheep of the daughters of the local priest. Moses defended the young women and, in gratitude, their father welcomed him into their family and made Moses a shepherd.

Soon God called Moses the shepherd to be the shepherd of the Hebrews and to lead them from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land. Moses led the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness where for forty years they continued to be shepherds as their ancestors had been. Knowing that he would never cross the Jordan into the Promised land, Moses said to God, ““Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd” (Numbers 27:16-17). Joshua, always faithful to God, was selected to lead his people home.

A good and faithful leader is the paradigm of an excellent shepherd. In Moses, we learn that a shepherd provides not only food and water for his flock. A good shepherd must also be a good leader, keeping the flock together, and choosing the best paths to follow. It is in David, however, the shepherd who became king, that we see the full range of character traits embodied in the ideal shepherd of Israel.

Surprisingly, David was still a boy when his shepherding skills were tested. Facing the mountain of a man Goliath on the battlefield, David passed up King Saul’s heavy armor for his own natural shepherding skills. Instead of a sword and shield, he chose a sling and smooth stones. David knew Goliath’s most vulnerable spot, like that of a wild beast, was in the center of his forehead and that is where he placed his stone, rendering the giant unconscious. He also knew the Philistines’ greatest vulnerability was Goliath. With their star warrior gone, the rest of the army was easily defeated. David’s enormous courage and keen wisdom were far more effective weapons than armor and swords. As a wise and courageous leader, David’s shepherding skills served him well before and after he became king. Despite his sometimes devious and cruel behavior, Israel remembered David as the ideal Shepherd-King.

As the biblical story continues to unfold, we find the role of shepherd to be an ongoing theme. The closing words of the Book of Ecclesiastes remind us that an effective shepherd is a teacher whose sayings are wise and

steadfast (Ecclesiastes 12:6-14). The prophet Isaiah sought to boost the drooping spirits of his people by reminding them that God was and always would be their shepherd. He proclaimed,

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. Isaiah 40:9-11

The biblical story teaches us that a good shepherd feeds and waters the sheep, gathers and protects them, wisely and courageously leads them, and teaches them the right paths to choose. Sadly, not all of the leaders of Israel were good shepherds of the people. Throughout their history, the Hebrew people continually turned their backs on God, worshiped false idols, refused to listen, and pursued their own selfish desires. They were led by kings who pursued their own personal goals to the detriment of the people.

The prophets railed against these bad shepherds. They called them stupid, selfish, and unwise. They destroyed God's vineyard, trampled God's garden, and scattered God's sheep. Yet God would not be deterred. God refused to turn his back on his people or forsake his flock. Through the prophets, God promised to restore his people and cleanse Israel of all evil.

In what is a cleverly delightful image, Jeremiah depicts God ridding his people of the evil caused by Egypt much as a shepherd would carefully pick pests off his cloak and flick them away (Jeremiah 43:12). The prophet Zechariah declares that the bad shepherds will be punished for leading God's people astray.

God speaks through Ezekiel to reassert that he will be Israel's shepherd. Amos, himself a shepherd, reminds us that the shepherd is always ready to rescue the sheep in danger and Micah refreshes the image of a shepherd's peaceful existence. In that familiar passage which Matthew later quotes we hear the promise,

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days . . . And [like a shepherd] he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Micah 5:2, 4-5a

The prophet Zechariah bears witness to God's impatience with the corrupt leadership of Israel by declaring that God will take over as shepherd of his sheep using two staffs: one named Grace and the other Unity (Zechariah 11:7). He makes clear that, unlike the kings, a true shepherd of the people would care for those who are perishing, seek those who are wandering, heal all who are maimed, and continue to nourish those who are healthy (11:16).

In the temple, the psalmists sang the prayers of the people, longing for God to shepherd them. In the beloved Psalm 23, a prayer of complete trust and total resignation is offered. The Shepherd-Lord meets every need. Food, water, encouragement, and hope are in abundant supply. He chooses the right paths. Even when those paths lead through places of deep darkness, places where our wildest terrors lurk, where narrow passages become steep ledges, where gaps and barriers threaten despair, there is no fear because the Shepherd has our best interests at heart. When enemies are at the door, he sets a banquet on the table, never allows the cup to empty, and blesses us. Goodness and Mercy, his rod and staff, offer constant protection and comfort as we dwell with God.

The Gospels begin with shepherds who are the first to hear that Jesus is born, the first to see the child, and the first to spread the good news. When Jesus finally steps on stage, he is clearly the embodiment all that the Old Testament narratives and prophecies said a shepherd should be. He had compassion for the crowds who came to him for they reminded him of sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:6). He described his ministry as being like a shepherd who sacrifices all to go after the one sheep who is lost. He sought out those who had strayed, were neglected, and forgotten. He healed wounds, provided physical and spiritual nourishment, taught his followers to seek the right paths, and acted with courage and wisdom. Finally, he said what was on everyone's mind: "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:10).

The Bible has taught me the characteristics of a good shepherd so that when I see Jesus in the Gospels I recognize him. When he claims to be the Good Shepherd, I know what he means and realize he offers what I need. It occurs to me that I am in his flock because when I hear his voice in scripture or sermon, in silence or song or prayer, I recognize it and know he is speaking to me. The Bible teaches us all we really need to know about shepherds so that when we encounter a real one, we will know it. The Bible introduces us to Jesus and in him we see the Good Shepherd who guides us through life to life eternal. Thanks be to God!

April 26, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Although our busy, semi-urban lives are far different from the pastoral responsibilities of the ancient shepherd, the image of you as the Good Shepherd who watches over us resonates with us body and soul, O God. We need someone to keep watch over us, to guide our steps, and to provide the essentials we need for life. Above all, we need to know that there is One who cares for us above all else. With humble gratitude, we thank you for being our Shepherd.

For the provisions of each day, we are thankful. None of us really understands hunger, but we know that some of our neighbors do not have adequate nutrition. We know that for some people in the world, the pangs of hunger never subside. Provide for them good food and drink so that their bodies may be strengthened, their minds refreshed, and their souls quickened with the reality of your love.

We are familiar with paths that take us into the dark places of life, O God. Illness, poor choices, grief, tragedy, depression, and despair lurk around shadowed corners and threatened to trip us as we feel our way along. Bring the light of your Spirit into our darkness, we pray, and illumine the path for us. Fill us with the warmth of your Presence so that we may never fear again. And bring us into that lush and pleasant valley where life thrives and we are at peace.

We are besieged on all sides by dangers. Enemies, never before imagined in our world, threaten our values, our way of life, our very lives. Help us as a world to defeat these enemies, O God. Grant us the confidence to go about our lives even as they appear on our doorstep. May the strength of truth, the power of our unity, and the transforming grace of love weaken their anger, diminish their hatred, and change their hearts. Give us a world of peace, O God.

We wake each day to the wonder of your goodness and lie down each night wrapped in the mercy of your love. Enable us to wear these gifts as garments of your grace and to live with one another as you dwell with us. May we abide this day and for all of life to come in the sure and unfailing mercy of your love which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.