

John 10: 1 – 10

Psalm 23

Northwood United Church

5-11-14

More About Sheep?

Would you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be aligned with your wondrous love for us, our God, our leader, our light.

Amen.

There is a lot of sheep, shepherd, gate business in these two passages, so I want to take a few minutes to separate them and understand them, before bringing them together.

So let's start with Psalm 23 – probably one of the best known passages of the Bible, inside and outside of church. It is right up there with the stories of Noah and the Ark and the Good Samaritan. BUT before I get into Psalm 23, I want to take us back into Psalm 22 – these are companion pieces and shouldn't be read one without the other. Psalm 22 is the one that starts,

“my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This psalm is a lament – but a little different than most forms of lament in the psalms, this one layers on the lament with almost no words of trust in God’s deliverance. We hear:

“Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”

“Do not be far from me...Many bulls encircle me...I am poured out like water...my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast.”

This amazing poetry goes on to describe in detail the feelings reflected by a community that has just walked through this dark time, and has emerged, shaking, stumbling, squinting, into the light and that is where Psalm 23 comes in. In response to these desperate laments we have delightful proclamations of trust and faith in God – almost like the volume of desperation in 22 needs to be matched in 23 by assurances of God’s presence, care, and deliverance. And that really is what psalm 23 is all about – not about the dark times, but stepping into the light *after* the dark. In verse four we have this amazing statement of faith:

“Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I’m not afraid when you walk by my side.”

And we can miss its beauty and big-ness because it is familiar – how many movies have we seen with the priest all in black at the graveside mumbling out

“⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will
fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort
me”

And we can just stop hearing it for what it really is. You see, the psalmist isn't saying that life with God is free of valleys – no, he is recognizing the despair of life regardless of whether you are walking with God or not. What is specifically pulled out here is this poignant understanding that we all have fresh pain, open wounds AND the ointment or salve of Gods care and presence and healing is with us. God does not erase the pain or make it vanish, but rather reduces the acute suffering we endure within.

I know that I can relate to the psalmist when he laments,

“My mouth sticks to my jaw...for dogs are all around me; thugs gang up
on me, my hands and feet have shriveled...they stare and gloat over
me”

And, I know the peace of resting in God:

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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.

You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

⁶ 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.

You see, texts in which the people of God are depicted as sheep arise from the experiences of vulnerable communities. In this case, the people are scattered and have fallen prey to those bent on Israel's destruction.

But it goes so much further than that, to such a greater depth of truth of the experience of being a human being. Just as a sheep is a particularly vulnerable creature, so too are we.

We can identify with this imagery. These passages offered them and offer us assurance that God is with us, to lead us as our shepherd, to rescue the scattered and bring them home.

Which takes us to our Gospel reading for this week: John 10: 1 - 10; this is a weird chunk of scripture to lift out of a greater story, made weirder still by the fact that if we follow the lectionary we won't get the whole story for another two years. So, rather than wait for the fourth Sunday in Easter for the next two years to find out the rest of the story – let's just lay it out now. The reason why I think this is important is not only because I really think biblical contextualism is important but also because it saves us from this generic sort of picture of Jesus as the shepherd, us as the sheep.

So, in John's Gospel, we will almost always follow this formula of sign, dialogue, discourse; Jesus performs a sign, which is followed by a dialogue as folks around try to figure it out, and then Jesus' offers his own discourse or explanation, interpretation of the sign. So this piece, verses 1 -10 is a little part of the discourse, the explanation part, but it's not even the whole thing! John, chapter 9 starts, "As he walked along (Jesus), he saw a man blind from birth." He then proceeds to spit on the

ground, make a little mud and wipe it on the blind mans eyes. The man goes and washes his face and he comes back able to see! And the folks around him are like, “well that doesn’t make any sense”, and they get him to retell the story (maybe they missed something?). This is the dialogue part that I mentioned, after the sign. So after they talk about it a bit, Jesus starts to try and explain it to them. Where we pick up in chapter 10, he has just spent the last part of chapter 9 trying to get them to understand, which is why we start our passage with, in one translation, “very truly, I tell you” and in another, “Let me set this before you as plainly as I can.” Ok, now we know, we are about to get something good here. In the five verses that follow, we have these images of almost surprising levels of intimacy, when we consider that Jesus is placing himself in this metaphor. *The sheep recognize the shepherds voice and follow because it is familiar.* We heard this same kind of intimacy over the last couple of weeks – when Jesus calls Mary by her name and she recognizes him, last week, the sharing of stories and breaking of bread – being at a meal with someone allows for that closeness. This is an opportunity to reflect on how we can be open to meeting Jesus. Last week I spoke about expecting to meet Christ in the everyday, holding the understanding that each person is a child of God, even those so close to us we might not see them well anymore.

So now in verse 6 it says “Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about, so he tried again. I AM the gate for the

sheep.” You think he might be a little frustrated by now, he continues, “whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out to pasture.” Now listen – there isn’t much more after this in the piece we have for today, but he keeps going! All the way down into verse 19 and then they just call him crazy because they still aren’t getting it.

Now, I can’t go very far past that little gem without a whole lot to say! We are entering into territory that can make us United Church folks a little uncomfortable – salvation! “I am the gate, whoever enters by me will be saved.” My last sermon before I finished at my last church was about reclaiming the word (and act) of evangelism (another scary United Church word).

Salvation, what does it mean? I did my undergraduate studies in the United States, and once I started exploring churches there, it certainly went long before I was confronted with the questions, “Have you been saved?” Now listen, I know that I have already preached more than half a sermon here, and there are several more sermons on this very topic whirling around in there, but today I am going to take this big topic, salvation, and just bring it right down to a size that we can address here with our snippet from John. I might offer that salvation means belonging to Jesus, but what does *that* mean? Because this isn’t about *saving* as an abstract or generic thought as it sometimes comes out in our culture. I want to know what salvation means in the Biblical sense – what is the meaning of salvation or redemption for the blind man that

Jesus has just healed? What is life like for a man who is born blind in turn of the century Palestine? A place where there is no rental assistance, no disability, no CNIB for support, a place where clearly his ancestors had done something bad and he was paying the price – not an image of God that we carry today, most of us, but very real then. So then what does his healing, his salvation mean? It means he is no longer ostracized, pushed to the margins of society, into isolation, shame, poverty, begging just to stay alive. His salvation is his entrance back, his welcome into community: this means security, safety, sustenance and all the fullness of what life in community means.

And we are left, both in Psalm 23 and this piece of John, with an offering of what God wants for each of us. Anyone who has ever spent any time with children will have seen them get a cup and a jug of milk or juice, mightily lifting the heavy vessel, struggling to get it over enough to pour it into the cup, so proudly announcing their crossover into independence, *I do it by my own self*, as the cup starts to fill, and fill, and fill and overflow, and we see their happy faces, still pouring as the milk floods onto the counter, down to the floor, into each little crevasse of the wood floors.

Psalm 23, “my cup brims with blessing, it overflows”. John 10: 10, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

It is in life with God that, in the midst of the darkness, we *know* of the light and how close we come to it. With God, we are welcomed into the fold, we are no longer alone. With God, our lives blossom into an abundance we never thought possible, a life overflowing with joy, generosity, forgiveness, and grace upon grace.

May it be so for each one of us. Amen.