



Good Shepherd Sunday: April 2016

St. Margaret's Cedar Cottage and Diocesan Confirmation

Psalm 23

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; *
 I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
 and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul *
 and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I shall fear no evil; *
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those
 who trouble me; *
 you have anointed my head with oil,
 and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days
 of my life, *
 and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Most of us have grown accustomed to a certain iconography of the Christian faith: the cross upon which a suffering Jesus hangs or from which a triumphant Jesus reigns; halos around

the heads of the saints; the Evangelists' symbols: Matthew's angel, Mark's lion, Luke's Ox and John's eagle; the Virgin Mary with her lily, the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine.

In his book entitled *Picturing the Bible: The earliest Christian art*, Classics Professor Jeffrey Spier, writes about a time when none of these images existed: the time of the early Christian Church, around the year 200. This was when Christian images began to emerge on the painted walls of the catacombs in Rome and on personal items such as lamps and rings. These images did *not* include crosses, halos, depictions of important people, loaves of bread, or cups of wine. What they did include was the image of a young, beardless shepherd standing, facing towards the viewer, carrying a lamb over his shoulder.

The Good Shepherd is one of the earliest images Christians used to express who their God was. The picture itself, the one I just described, was a traditional pagan image commonly found on Roman sarcophagi or coffins, an image alluding to a Roman story meant to evoke the peacefulness of the afterlife. What Christian artists did was to appropriate this figure and invest it with purely Christian significance, the kind of significance we heard in the words of our gospel today in which Jesus asserts that he is the Good Shepherd who lays his life down for his sheep.

And so, this early image was not a *literal* depiction of Christ. It was, instead, an image appropriated from the culture of the time—a young, beardless shepherd carrying a lamb across his shoulders—invested with and expressive of a new meaning—God, Christians of that time were saying, had come to be with God's people as the Good Shepherd, the one who leads and feeds his own, the one in fact so connected to his own that he would give his life for them.

In many, many churches today preachers are struggling to say something meaningful about this ancient image of God as the Good Shepherd. Many will begin with questions about its relevance for us today in that most of us live lives far removed from the nomadic lives of shepherds and sheep.

But the greater thing that will need to be addressed in this image is that you and I don't like thinking of ourselves as sheep in need of a shepherd. This is because to go there is somehow to cop to our own incompetence, our own need to depend on something bigger and more powerful than ourselves, and, focusing on the gospel of John's specific and unique assertion that the Good Shepherd is the one who lays his life down for the sheep, our need for nothing less than a savior.

Can we be who we are as competent grown-up 21st century people—so adept, so connected and communicative, so creative, so awake and still need and be fed by this image, no, this reality that our God is one who leads and feeds us, and, yes, lays his life down for us, his own whom he knows by name?

This is what I believe. That far from dealing a blow to our capable, competent, functioning and functional selves, this view of God and our ability to rely on a God like this, makes it possible to be in the world as our capable, competent, functioning and functional selves. For in my experience, unless we have someplace to go where we do not have to be capable, where we do not have to have it all together, where we can express our need for guidance

from the hand of another, our need for food from the hand of another, our need for utter dependence on someone or something greater than ourselves, our need for a savior, we cannot find the deep strength and confidence in life to be our most capable and creative selves.

Paradoxically, then, it is through an appropriate and utter dependence on God and the trust that no matter what, we will not be deserted, that our independence in the world and our confidence comes. It is through our radical dependence upon something or someone who guides, feeds, leads and gives us all, that our own capabilities can flower and best express themselves. This is an especially important thing for us today as we confirm, receive and reaffirm a new group of youth and adults in our Anglican Church. For at the heart of the reason we do this is to connect each and every person more deeply to a God who guides, feeds, leads and gives to the baptized who are sent into the world to do courageous, difficult things.

When I was in Stanley Park some weekends ago walking around I saw this in action. I saw a mother with her two children—one a girl of about three or four and a babe in arms—staked out in a play area near a bark bench. The girl whose name was Imogen was dressed in boots and a tutu. Imogen found a playmate, an older girl who was playing with her while her mother sat on the park bench. The two girls were having a ball but from time to time Imogen would, I believe, get a little overwhelmed by her older rambunctious playmate. And so every once in a while Imogen would leave her playmate and simply go and stand by her own mother who did not say anything to her but simply placed her hand on her daughter's back. Time and time again Imogen went to her mother for a reassuring touch, and time and time again, having touched back to his place of safety, Imogen returned to her rough and tumble new friend.

In speaking of the image of the Good Shepherd and its roots in Jewish tradition, particularly as it is expressed in our Psalm 23, Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann comments that these dimensions of the God of the Jewish people as the one who leads and feeds, dimensions that set the stage for the Christian appropriation and expansion of the image as the one who will lay his life down for his own, these dimensions are in many ways feminine, maternal images. And so I want to close with the 23rd Psalm--not with the version we find in our prayer book but instead with artist Bobby McFerrin's version of the psalm that he dedicated to his mother. As you hear it in this new way, listen afresh for the one upon whom you can depend.

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.
She restores my soul;
She rights my wrongs.
She leads me in a path of good things
And fills my heart with song.
Even though I walk through a dark and dreary land,
There is nothing that can shake me
She has said she won't forsake me

I'm in her hand.
She sets a table before me in the presence of my foes
She anoints my head with oil,
And my cup overflows.
Surely, surely goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will live in her house forever and ever.