

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD
PSALM 23; EPHESIANS
FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
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MARCH 2, 2008

Ephesians 5: 8-14

8 For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light-- 9 for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. 10 Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; 13 but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14 for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

We have already said and sung versions of our second scripture reading. According to most surveys, the 23rd Psalm is the best known and best loved scripture in the Bible. The challenge, of course, is that we have heard it all, but God is always making things new. God's Word is new each time we hear it. So listen again to God's Word from Psalm 23. May the light of Christ shine on us through this Psalm of King David.

Psalm 23

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff--they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long and forever.

The Lord is my shepherd. At our last Presbytery meeting, there was a long discussion about whether we should require those joining the Presbyterian Church to reference Jesus as Lord. Some of our brothers and sisters in Christ do not use hierarchical language for God because of the association of hierarchy with oppression. They miss out on some wonderful music that calls Jesus King of Kings and Lord of Lords. If they are not careful, they may miss out on Jesus as Lord and shepherd of their lives. If Jesus is not their Lord, who or what is, their intellect, their ambition or their self-righteousness?

In our Disciple Bible Study class, we were asked to discuss a woman's statement that she could accept Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. We wondered if the woman had a narrow sense of what it means to be saved. Perhaps she did not want Jesus interfering with how she lived her life and made her everyday decisions.

A man named Darrell expressed similar views as part of Friday's devotion in These Days this week (February 29, 2008). Copies of These Days, a daily devotional published by PCUSA is available in the narthex.

In a discussion about prayer, Darrell commented to his Men's Bible Study, "Let me get this straight. We're talking about letting God take more active control?" "That's right," another man responded. "We have to see where God leads us." "What is sounds like to me is dangerous!" said Darrell. "I'm used to telling God what I want, and then God either gets on board or not. Now we're talking about God calling the shots. I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I'm ready to give God that kind of latitude."

What about us? Is Jesus the Lord and shepherd of our lives? Do we follow God's guidance when we decide how to spend our time and our money? Does God shepherd our relationships and our priorities?

In this post-modern age, people tend to reject authorities. We depend upon our own understanding. In the Wikipedia of religion, we are the god of our own lives. Truth becomes a personal choice. In the post-modern world, there are many lords and shepherds. We are encouraged to take our pick.

Today's churches and new age religions offer a smorgasbord of beliefs. According to one national survey, 40% of Americans between 25 and 29 believed they would return to earth in a different body after they die (Newsweek January 28, 2008). Many Americans who call themselves Christians pick and choose from various Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, American Indian and pagan beliefs, including reincarnation, communication with the dead, the prosperity gospel, angels on every shoulder, crystals and other jewelry having miraculous power, good witches in nature and just about anything else you can imagine. The concept of special divine knowledge, known as gnosticism in the first century, is alive and well in America today. Scientology, Kabbalah and Unity are but a few of many New Age paths open to wandering believers today.

In post-modern America, the individual is the authority and Lord. Many Americans follow shepherds whose primary credentials are their charisma and their ability to say what we want to hear. Who cares if they study Hebrew and Greek, pass an exam or undergo psychological and spiritual testing? On one web site the only information about the background of the pastor was what shows were on his TIVO and what songs were on his IPOD.

Many Christians today, and perhaps that includes us, are not comfortable with turning over control. We want Jesus to save us when things get tough, but most days we want to be in charge. The consequences of our choices are reflected in high anxiety and lower levels of satisfaction and happiness. Mother Theresa once said she saw more loneliness and despair among her donors in New York than she witnessed on the streets of Calcutta.

It makes a difference if Jesus is our Lord and shepherd day in and day out. Jesus called it new life.

Many years ago I read a book by Phillip Keller titled A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm. Keller was a shepherd in East Africa for eight years. He owned a sheep ranch. Keller said shepherds are not alike. Shepherds vary greatly in their care and concern for their sheep. The tenant who ran the ranch next door to Keller neglected his sheep. They were undernourished. The only water available to them was stagnant. Their skin was diseased with open sores. They had nothing to keep the insects and predators away. Their thirst, hunger and fear made them restless. Keller could see despair and hopelessness in their eyes.

Keller's description of his neighbor's sheep reminded me of a time several years ago when my son and I were looking for a new cocker spaniel after our dog Sweetie died. We drove into a rural area southeast of Austin. There was junk and garbage in the yard. The puppies were inside the house, which was filthy. It smelled of urine and stale food. They had a daughter around John's age who looked almost as unhealthy as the animals. I asked to see the puppies' mother. I was appalled at her condition and the so-called kennel in which she was kept.

Although John had been on several trips to Reynosa by that time, he had not experienced the filth and squalor he saw that day. The poverty is far greater in Reynosa, but the families associated with Faith Ministries have hope and joy. They show pride in their one room cinderblock homes, even when they are built on the side of a garbage dump.

Sometimes I wonder if we realize how fortunate we are to have God in Jesus Christ as our Lord and shepherd. God shepherds us through the body of Christ. God shepherds us through the Word, worship, service and prayer. There is a qualitative difference in life when the Lord is our shepherd. Here at San Gabriel we spend so much time at church or with each other, we may not know how different life is for those outside a community of faith.

Ray Barron and Virginia Lazenby are participating in Leadership Georgetown. They have visited the jail and several social service agencies. Some of the stories they heard are heart-breaking. According to recent statistics 1 in every 19 African American adults are in prison and 1 in every 36 Hispanic American adults. Joan Shellene and others who work with Kairos know what an incredible difference it makes when prisoners begin to follow Jesus as their Lord and Shepherd. Even inside prison walls they experience new life.

We are mistaken if we imagine following Jesus means we lounge in green pastures all day. In the days of King David, a shepherd usually led sheep through dangerous terrain before they found green grass. The Lord provides tables of abundance and joy, but we may first travel through dark valleys in the midst of what seem like enemies.

If the Lord is our shepherd, we will be led beside still waters and find our souls restored. We can count on it. God may lead us to a particular worship service, to a Bible study, to Mo Ranch, to an Emmaus Walk or to our back yard.

Keller said sheep will not rest if they are hungry, thirsty, bothered by bugs or afraid. There are many things that bother sheep, just as there are many things that bother us. It is the shepherd who provides peace and security. It is the Shepherd who makes us lie down and find rest.

On Keller's ranch they called sheep that strayed "fence crawlers." Like people who stray from the Lord, avoid commitments to a community of faith or disregard God's Word, some sheep strike out on their own. Sometimes we believe the grass will be greener if we disregard our faith. Maybe we will be more popular or climb higher on the corporate ladder. If we do not consider the least, the lost and the lonely, we can spend our money on possessions, the latest electronics, another trip or that special car. Sometimes we want to build our own bridge to the future, not God's bridge.

Our youth know kids at school who have strayed. We hear about people who stray in the news. Sometimes straying just means we get lost. Life is OK but something is missing. Other times, our fence crawling is more costly. I talked with a mother recently whose son was killed in a car wreck. He drank several beers and drove too fast.

Last week a pastor called to ask for suggestions about a scripture to use in the funeral of mother who died eight months pregnant. The child's father was not the woman's husband. Infidelity, drug abuse and child neglect were part of the woman's life. The pastor feared the same would be true of her children and grandchildren. The woman was a Christian. She probably accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior many years ago when she joined the church, but Jesus was not the Lord and Shepherd of her daily life. We make choices every day. Our choices affect our lives and the lives of those we love.

In the paper recently, they said denominations like ours are religious dinosaurs ([Austin American Statesman](#) February 26, 2008). Perhaps they are right. I agree with those who say we spend too much time arguing with each other, but people who wish to join the San Gabriel Presbyterian Church will be asked to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Our answer is significant. We must answer the same question again and again with every decision we make.

My friends, our shepherd is ready to feed us. The table is prepared. It is the Lord's Table, and we are invited. Some of us have traveled through dark valleys to get here this morning. May we find rest and restoration in communion with our Lord. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.