

“In Right Paths”

March 27, 2022

Selah: Life in a Minor Key series

On Christmas Eve 2020, after we had gathered outside to celebrate the birth of Jesus, Jim Grace handed me something before he left. Before that night, he had shared about time spent in Africa in the late 70s - more specifically in Lesotho - a small mountainous country surrounded by South Africa. During a meeting we'd been talking about shepherds, and Jim told me what he remembered about how excited the shepherds he met in Lesotho became when they heard about the shepherds in the Christmas story. They could identify with those shepherds.

On that Christmas Eve night, after we had read about the shepherds who guarded their flocks at night and were the first to hear the “good news of great joy” from the angels, Jim gave me a flash drive with a note. On the drive were pictures of the shepherds - or the “herd boys” as they were known when he met them in Lesotho. You'll see those pictures here. **SLIDE:** Images of shepherds/sheep Jim said it could get cold there, so you notice the heavy coats worn by the “herd boys.” I've always been grateful for these pictures because they've offered me faces of more modern-day shepherds and the flock they tend.

I'm not sure anyone knows exactly why Psalm 23 has become the most beloved psalm - and one of the most beloved chapters in all of Christian Scripture. You can hear these verses in a variety of musical genres - from rap (anyone remember Coolio?) to lots of choral arrangements to Gospel to country. These words have lasted.

Maybe it's just familiar or very comforting. Some of us may have memorized it, so it stays with us. But really the psalm covers a wide range of situations - life and death. It offers peace, and it's really an invitation to trust in God's care as God gathers us, loves us, comforts us, and puts us on right paths.

David, to whom we attribute these verses - David, who had tended sheep in the field when he was called to be king - is resting in God's care, but he's also aware that God is the Source of life. God makes us alive and restores us to life, leading us in right paths - paths that lead to life and health and strength.

Let's be honest: sometimes we get on a path that doesn't bring us life, health, and strength. We're led by our own desires - and our tendency toward self-

centeredness, self-satisfaction, and even self-destruction is a reality. We need God's help to avoid that path and go on right paths.

Knowing more about shepherds and sheep helps us to hear the psalm for what it is - not just what we assume it is or what we want it to be. First, sheep aren't the smartest animals. They're cute and gentle, but they're also curious and vulnerable - easily led into places that aren't the safest for them. One woman who raises sheep says that they flock together and follow a leader, so if one gets separated, the outlook isn't good.

And when asked why sheep need a shepherd, her answer was simple: sheep don't always make good choices. They'll go uphill and when it's time to come down, it's difficult for them, and they get stuck. They sometimes end up unable to move easily, stuck on their backs, and need help getting up. Sheep are creatures of habit and will follow the same paths and go to the same places to graze, so they're not the best place to graze anymore. Sheep need guidance of a shepherd to lead them to safe and plentiful places, to protect them by setting boundaries, and to correct them with a rod and staff. They need help to navigate through valleys onto higher ground.

Shepherd and sheep offered very familiar images for those around Jesus. Hebrew Scriptures were filled with shepherd and sheep images. Moses and David were shepherds who became leaders among the people. In the Book of Ezekiel, God speaks about shepherds – leaders – who only care for themselves and disregard the needs of others. With careless shepherds, the flock scatters and is in danger. So, the image of a shepherd relates to leadership.

Even more, the region around Jerusalem, has rough and stony ground, which is well-suited for a pastoral society where shepherds would tend sheep. Being a shepherd was a "dirty job" - not a glorious job. It was humble, hard work. Shepherds usually worked alone and were not high on the social ladder. They put their lives on the line to protect the sheep, to keep them from wandering off, and to lead them to food and water when it was hard to find.

This shepherd was invested in the lives of the sheep. The sheep trust the shepherd because he can be trusted. He is with them. He is concerned for the good of the flock. He has authority in their lives because of he invests himself in the lives of the sheep. It's not just a shepherd's job to care for the sheep, but he's willing to lay down his life for them. It's not a profession, but a connection and relationship. He knows the names of the sheep, and they know him by his voice.

For shepherds in Judea, the sheep were their livelihood. Sheep were raised for

wool, so they stayed with the same shepherd for many years. They were named and claimed by the shepherd. He cares about them and seeks them out if they wander off. When the shepherd led the flock to a new place, he went in front to make sure it was safe, and the sheep followed when he had secured the path.

A shepherd was constantly at work. It was never a passive job, but an active job – always paying attention to what was happening. He had to have courage in times when the sheep might be threatened. Most of all, he had to have patience and love for the sheep. He fed them, gathered them, carried them, and led them.

And the words from the 23rd Psalm give us insight. “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” Those tools of the shepherd were important. They offered protection and correction for the sheep. The rod helped the shepherd to ward off predators like wolves who would be a serious threat to the flock or others. The staff assisted the shepherd on the rocky ground, but it also allowed him to bring back wandering sheep if they strayed from the protection of the flock. The rod and staff remind the sheep that the shepherd is there, offering some comfort.

The beautiful image of sheep lying down is interesting because it’s not easy to do, according to Phillip Keller. Keller says that there are four things sheep have to be free of if they are to be relaxed enough to lie down: 1) fear, 2) friction and tension with other sheep, 3) pests, parasites, and aggravation, and 4) hunger. The shepherd cares for all of those and makes it possible for the sheep to be relaxed because of their care. It’s not too much of a stretch to think about what we need to rest. Consider: no fear, no fighting or conflict with others, no illness or aggravation, no hunger. The psalm says that God provides that for us.

Sheep follow a shepherd with confidence that they will be cared for no matter what. Dwelling in the house of the Lord forever is not about making a reservation for later on, but rather living with an assurance of God’s presence right now. It means trusting in God’s providence – that we walk in goodness and mercy every day – even when it may not feel like it.

Last week, I shared pictures of a congregation gathering to worship in Ukraine. This week, I was moved by a picture of Olga Misik, a 17-year-old woman who protested in Russia, sitting in front of a group of riot police. She sat on the ground with her legs folded and read the 1993 Russian Constitution aloud to draw attention to the rights of people to peacefully protest, to take part in election, and to freedom of speech. She was arrested and fined. Again, I was challenged to consider what my

response would be in a moment like that. It was easy see someone walking through the valleys.

If we want the blessing of green pastures and still waters, then we follow God. If we want to experience the fullness of life - like a full banquet table and a cup that doesn't run out, God provides it as we trust. As that relationship grows, we understand that God can be trusted.

But it's not just a guarantee of all the best and most comforting parts of life. The psalm is honest, too. When we find ourselves facing despair, darkness, and even death, the loving presence of God offers us hope. And goodness and mercy from God pursue us so much that the last line drives us back to the beginning - the Lord is my Shepherd. And we don't stand in want because we have what we need - a loving God who cares, protects, and corrects us - and gives us new life.

There's a great documentary that highlights a common love of Psalms which brought together Bono, lead singer of the Irish rock band U2, and Eugene Peterson, writer of *The Message*, the Bible in contemporary language, which is a paraphrase of Scripture. Bono wrote to Peterson about how much he liked Peterson's work, and they set up a meeting. I'll send you the link for whole story, which is well worth your time, but take a look at the small section where Bono talks about Psalms - and particularly Psalm 23. **MEDIA:** Bono and Eugene Peterson

It's so interesting that Bono remembers these words. Bono mentions the rawness and brutal honesty of Psalms - the explosive joy along with the deep sorrow and confusion that they convey. Psalm 23 covers it all, and if we look at our reading for today, we'll see how each line really does remind us of who we are and who God is as our Shepherd. With the love for the 23rd Psalm, it's easy for the words to become sentimental - words for a funeral where we look back on Jesus' love rather than words to live by right now.

As we continue our Lenten journey, the goal is to walk more faithfully in God's way - in right paths - and seek God's will for our lives. We can do that as we trust in God's care and love for us. It is for us - and not just as a look back - but a promise as we move forward in faith!

Let us pray...