

“Whose Shepherd?”

David L. Petersen

Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

My father-in-law, Leo Myers, is a pillar of his local Presbyterian church. He has strong opinions about a number of things related to his religious life. That is not surprising, since he has had ninety years to create them. These opinions include what should happen at his funeral. He has identified certain hymns, which he does not want to have sung—most notably “For all the saints.” Moreover, he has said in no uncertain terms that he does not want to have the 23rd psalm read. Sara and I have known about these preferences for a number of years, but only when I learned that I would be preaching about the 23rd psalm did we decide to ask him why he felt this way. When we did, he offered two reasons. First, he did not want it read because everyone else does. Second, he didn’t want it read because he didn’t understand why it should be read at a funeral. I haven’t had a chance to talk with him about these judgments. Nonetheless, what he said about the 23rd psalm made me wonder if we have lost it to funerals. Leo certainly thought so.

So, let’s pretend that Leo is sitting next to Sara this morning and that we are exploring with him this psalm. He is used to hearing it read at funerals. It, like other scriptural texts read at funeral, works powerfully on us. Funerals are deeply emotional occasions. When familiar texts are used, they provide comfort to those who are feeling great loss. But if that is the only time we hear the 23rd Psalm, we may miss some of what it has to say. So, let’s try to encounter this poem with open minds and hearts this morning, particularly as we prepare to celebrate communion later in our service.

We have already heard the two lectionary readings for this fourth Sunday of Easter. Both involve a shepherd. These texts are, however, very different. One is a poem, the other is a speech. In one we hear about a shepherd; in the other, we hear the shepherd speak. In one, the focus is on an individual sheep; in the other, we hear about a flock. So, at the outset it is natural to ask about the significance of each text, since they are so different.

What may one say about **the poem**?

First, there is a series of vivid images. When we read through the 23rd psalm, we often move so quickly that we do not experience fully the pictures being sketched by the poet. So, let's slow down and focus on several of the scenes.

-- "He makes me lie down in green pastures." When I close my eyes, I can imagine a solitary sheep lying down but with its head up. This sheep has already eaten its fill and is now resting, lying in that green pasture. The mood is one of calm and satisfaction.

-- "He leads me beside still waters?" I think this phrase might be better translated, "he leads me to calm waters." The image could be one of a placid lake or a gentle stream. It would be a place where the sheep could drink without fear of falling in or being caught in a turbulent current.

-- "I walk through the darkest valley," We have moved to a steep ravine that the sun has been unable to illumine; it is filled with dark shadows. It is a dangerous place, as another possible translation suggests, "I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." I imagine rocky terrain. Since there is no sun, the rocks are slippery, covered with moss, making it difficult to walk without falling.

The 23rd Psalm is a poem that includes graphic and evocative images.

Second, the psalmist's identity changes during the course of the poem. At first, we hear a sheep talking. I know it sounds crazy to think about a talking sheep, but there are a number of

talking animals in the OT. In Gen 3, one reads about a snake that can talk. And then, in Num 22, there is a donkey that is capable of speech. In fact, the Psalter gives voice even to inanimate parts of the world: the heavens can tell the glory of God (19:1); the floods can lift up their voices (93:3). In a world that is so alive with speech, a talking sheep is not all that strange.

Nonetheless, by the time we reach verse 5, the psalmist no longer uses the metaphor of a sheep and is, instead, talking about a person. She now has a table set before her; her hair shines with oil. The metaphor of the sheep gives way to another metaphor: God hosting someone at a splendid feast.

Third, the poem is full of movement. At the outset, the sheep is lying in a green meadow. Soon thereafter it is walking near water, then on some paths, and finally it passes through a dangerous valley. After the journey is over, the psalmist stays at the home of a gracious host. This poem can be read as a metaphor of a person's life as a journey. God is one who accompanies that person during both good times and dangerous moments.

Fourth, there is a resolute focus on the individual in the 23rd psalm. The pronouns “me,” “my” or “I” appear seventeen times in the English translation, seventeen times in six verses. One study bible I regularly consult said this about the 23rd psalm—“The imagery of the Lord as shepherd and the people as a flock is developed here.” That statement is terribly wrong. There is no reference to the flock at all. We hear about one sheep, not a flock.

This prominence of an individual voice might strike us as inappropriate, sounding arrogant or egotistical. Would we like the psalm better if it read this way?

The Lord is **our** shepherd; **we** shall not want.

He makes **us** lie down in green pastures;

He leads **us** beside still waters;

He restores **our** souls
 He leads **us** in right paths,
 For his names sake.
 Even though **we** walk through the darkest valley,
We fear no evil;
 For you are with **us**;
 Your rod and your staff--
 They comfort **us**.

And so on.

If we had such a psalm, I am sure that we would like it. It's not bad. Still, that poem about a flock of sheep takes the edge off. The individual is now part of a larger group. There is safety in numbers. There is no such safety in the canonical form of the 23rd Psalm. The individual is exposed, subject to terror in a foreign terrain, alone, lost without someone to help.

Our psalm focuses on the terror that an individual and only an individual can feel. A nightmare can be such an experience—when a person suffers from deep fright. There are psychological valleys of terror.

Others suffer from physical valleys of terror. The New York Times (4/20) recently published an article about a firefight in a valley in Afghanistan. The reporter wrote this about the experience:

“A soldier caught in an ambush—looking for safety while returning fire, with ears ringing and skin pouring sweat—can feel utterly alone, trapped in a box of crisscrossing lead and terrifying sound, with death an instant away.” (NYT 4/20)

There are valleys of danger—times when we experience terror all alone.

The 23rd psalm is a poem based on the experience of an individual who has suffered terror and enjoyed blessings, knowing that God is with her. She can say, “The Lord is **my** Shepherd.”

Now let us move to the Gospel of John. How does the shepherd’s **speech** in John 10 enrich our understanding of the Lord as a shepherd?

First, it allows for the notion of a “good” shepherd.” This “the good shepherd” is defined in opposition to a hired hand. The good shepherd owns the flock. In contrast, the hired hand is there only to earn a wage. When danger appears, the hired hand vanishes. At this point, the good shepherd sounds very much like the shepherd in the 23rd psalm.

Second, the good shepherd is willing to defend his sheep to the point of death. Here, this shepherd sounds different from the one in the 23rd psalm. It is difficult to imagine that the psalmist thought that the Lord as her shepherd could die. In John, however, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The expression, “to lay down one’s life,” is obviously a way of thinking about Jesus’ death. The gospel of John does not talk about a good shepherd leading the sheep along proper paths or providing food for them. The most important thing that the good shepherd does is dying on behalf of the flock.

What is so good about that? The imagery of a shepherd in Ps 23 is that of a vigorous defender and provider. That would seem to be good. But John takes the notion of a good shepherd further, drawing on the realities of shepherding in ancient Palestine. There were wild animals that might drag a sheep away from the flock. And there were bandits, who might steal sheep. Either could kill a shepherd. John points to a shepherd who would defend his flock to the death, his death.

John also wants us to know that this laying down of Jesus' life was voluntary—and a demonstration of power not of weakness. Jesus says, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.” This good shepherd is a strong shepherd, having power over death and life.

Third, this speech focuses on the flock, not on an individual sheep. Just as John reconceives the role of the shepherd based on Jesus death and resurrection, he likewise thinks differently about sheep. Jesus does not lay down his life for an individual sheep; he does this on behalf of the entire flock. For John, the flock was a metaphor for God's people. As a result, we, as members of the church, can now talk about the good shepherd as our shepherd. One of us could earlier say, “The Lord is **my** shepherd.” To that we can now add, “The Lord is **our** shepherd.”

Fourth, the good shepherd has “other sheep,” sheep that do not currently belong to the fold but who will, at some point, become part of it. John anticipates that there will finally be one great flock. Those others in Jesus day were almost certainly the Gentiles. They were not part of the Church. But about them Jesus could say, “I have other sheep.” They already belong to him, even if they do not know it. That is something important for us to hear. There are “sheep” beyond the walls of the church for whom Jesus has already laid down his life. That means we can say, “The Lord is **their** shepherd.” They, like we, belong to one great flock.

Now we can return to my father-in-law, Leo. “Leo you don't have to use the 23rd psalm at your funeral. There are plenty of other comforting texts that can be read. It's more important to hear and experience the world of that wonderful poem.” With it and with the good shepherd's speech, we can affirm:

The Lord is my shepherd

The Lord is our shepherd

The Lord is their shepherd

The Lord is a good shepherd.