

**May 3, 2020**

Good morning! I will be using the Grail translation from the Hebrew for Psalm 23. I like the Grail translation for a couple of reasons. First, it uses inclusive language and two, the voice to me seems to be more active. The Psalm begins:

“Lord, you are my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.”

Good Shepherd Sunday. I have been trying not to listen to my fellow preacher friends talk about the Lectionary for this Sunday, but have failed. I was going to stay away from Bible study last night, but didn't. Eric asked if I had some good puns for today! No, Eric, I'm not as clever as you! My puns would be baaaaaad.

My experience of sheep is limited. My Dad raised sheep to keep the fields cut down. And, I loved all the paths they made, as a child, so I could get around the back 40 acres to play. We did have a mean buck that pinned me against a barn when I was 4yrs. old and rammed me a couple of times before Dad heard my screams. It was a story my parents would tell, I don't remember it. That buck did not last long in our herd. But that is my extent of knowledge about sheep and shepherding. From a bit of research, I do know raising sheep, properly, the magic word, properly, takes a great deal of expertise. Sheep build a trust with their shepherd. They know the shepherd's voice and follow.

Humans and sheep have some similarities: fearfulness, stubborn, timid, dim-witted, tend to follow the pack, willful. I'm sure you are as surprised as I that in this global pandemic, we are witnessing two very different sides of our human family. Some people listen to scientists, authorities in the medical field and responsible government officials who ask that we stay at home, not only for ourselves, but others. People using their money to help with testing, research, bringing food to hospital workers and those less fortunate, on and on! Great generosity. The emphasis on everyone's well-being, globally. Then we see people, despite all the warnings, who attend large parties or flood the beaches, or even protest stay-at-home orders with signs that say “my body, my choice” or “My right: Sacrifice the weak! Survival of the fittest”. (That one really touched home when I realize I am one of the “weak”.) Willful people, who are convinced they are right and are somehow, being abused by the system. People who do not follow scientific or medical authorities, in fact, don't trust them. People who want what they want when they want it.

A couple of weeks ago, we heard the story about Doubting Thomas. Thomas was not present when the Risen Jesus first appeared to the disciples. Thomas didn't believe his friends. He couldn't take their word on face value, he wanted proof. Suddenly, when Thomas was speaking, Jesus appears. Jesus was there all along. We are created by a loving God, who is always present and Jesus promised he would always be with us, always. Life seems to be a set of trials, some small, some very large. Our spiritual journey is how we navigate these trials; are we a blessing or a curse. Do we love others as best we can or are willful and refuse to care about others, sunk in our own misfortune? Unfortunately, the answer is probably both. I know it is with me, and, I keep trying. My frustrations, my impatience, my own willfulness, usually end up falling on the person who least deserves it. As I navigate my journey, where do I turn for guidance? Do I turn to the TV news, entertainment magazines, political leaders, Wall Street, my friends who think the way I do?

Lord, you are my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

The first three steps of Alcoholics Anonymous puts it this way:

Step one: We admitted we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step two: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand God.

When life becomes unmanageable, where do I turn?

Being still, in God's presence, restores my soul, even if only for 10 minutes here and there. Taking the time to connect to the God who loves me and you, unconditionally, brings me back to my senses. God is as close as our next breath. It's not that we have to find God, we only need to acknowledge that God is already present.

I pray for all those people who are so lost in themselves, in their anger, in their lack of trust, and I encourage you to, also, each day, because in doing that, we pray for ourselves, also. We are all connected, whether we realize it or not, whether we accept it or not. We need one another, and one another's gifts to survive. When I read the readings for this week, I must admit, my mind went right to Handel's Messiah and the line, "all we like sheep, have gone astray". (and the meandering melody of that line, like sheep straying in every direction!) Yes, we all stray. We all forget we are one in God. We all forget that at a time like this, maybe being active is not all that important. I get tired, I'm sure you do, too. I look at the world and worry, as I'm sure you do. We need one another and I am so grateful to everyone who works so hard to keep us connected. The bottom line here, is, we all stray, time and time again, God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit is waiting for us to remember, they are right here and have been and will be, just waiting for us to acknowledge their presence, to accept their strength, hope and courage that they freely offer and we desperately need:

Lord, you are my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.

Fresh and green are the pastures

Where you give me repose.

Near restful waters you lead me,

To revive my drooping spirit.

You guide me along the right path;

You are true to your name.

If I should walk in the valley of darkness

No evil would I fear.

You are there with your crook and your staff;

With these you give me comfort.

You have prepared a banquet for me

In the sight of my foes.

My head you have anointed with oil;

My cup is overflowing.

Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me

All the days of my life.

In the Lord's own house shall I dwell,

Forever and ever.

Amen.

