



Sermon

God Shepherds You

Psalm 23; Jeremiah 23:1-6; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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Today we have the theme of God as shepherd for his people. In Old Testament times, rulers over nations were often referred to as shepherds. Jeremiah wrote in a time when the nation of Judah was nearly conquered. He warned the rulers of Israel that they had not cared for the people as God intended – instead they had scattered them. Therefore God would deal with them and would bring the people back from exile to their own land. Then they would be tended to properly. There is the promise of the Messiah who would come to reign wisely and justly; he would save his people. He would be called Yahweh, our Righteous Saviour. Now, of course, we know that Righteous Saviour is our Lord Jesus Christ. And in the gospel passage we find him ministering to the needs of his disciples and the people who press upon him – they are in fact the larger flock.

As Peter Lloyd told us last week, Jesus had just had the difficult news that his cousin John had been executed. Then the twelve disciples arrived back from their practical mission training in the villages of Israel, preaching repentance and healing the sick. They were excited to tell him all that had happened but the press of people was such that this inner core group and Jesus couldn't even get a chance to eat. So he said, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

Do you notice that rest is important in God's economy? He rested after creation and commanded humanity to take a day a week to rest. Remember it is one of the Ten Commandments. It is good for our physical; it is good for our psychological health; it is good for our spiritual health. I think some of us need to hear that. We are so active that we never rest properly. The Maker's Instruction manual says we need to take time to rest and time to worship God. Without that, we wear down and are less effective.

In the Gospel passage, we see Jesus prescribing rest for his disciples after all the giving entailed in the mission trip. They took a boat to go to a quiet place but the crowd hurried around the shore and got there first. Yet Jesus was not focussed on his own need; he saw them as sheep without a shepherd. Sheep without a shepherd are vulnerable. Very young sheep need to be carried to keep up with the flock. The flock is at risk of attack from predators; they can fall down cliffs, get trapped, get cast. To thrive sheep need good pasture. It is up to the shepherd to provide it or lead them to it.

So here Jesus sees their need and he taught them. That is the equivalent of the guidance and leading of a shepherd with the flock. Next he fed them since they are in the wilderness where there was no food for a crowd. As the gospel reading continues in verse 54, we find that he again has people crowding him as they beg him to heal the sick. We saw a couple of weeks ago, that the action of touching the edge of his cloak was an expression of faith that he was the Messiah and that he would have the gift of healing.

Here we have the true shepherd of Israel – the one who would say, “I am the good shepherd.”¹ He is concerned for his people, he teaches them, feeds them, heals them and provides rest for them.

Middle-Eastern Shepherding



Keeping sheep in the Middle-east is very different from keeping sheep in NZ. In the dry season the hills dry out and almost all vegetation dies off. Then the rains come and that bare ground can blossom overnight with the most wonderful display of flowers. In this harsh, changeable environment the shepherd needs to know or find out where there is grass and take them to it. He has to know where the water holes are which will keep his sheep watered.



Perhaps a more striking difference though, is that Middle-Eastern shepherds care for their sheep personally not just as a flock. They know each of them by name and can recount the events of each animal’s life, every injury, every sickness.

Psalm 23

The 23rd Psalm is also set for today. Remember that David the author was himself a shepherd boy. He drew on his own experience of caring for sheep and likened the relationship between God and his people to that relationship of shepherd to his sheep. Let me read Psalm 23 to you.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.



God knows you

Just the first sentence is so significant – “The LORD is my shepherd.” When you see “LORD” in capitals it points to the Hebrew word *Yahweh* - the name that God revealed to Moses in the wilderness. *Yahweh* is my shepherd;

Yahweh himself! Not some junior angel, but the Lord Almighty, the creator of all things shepherds you – personally. He knows you by name; he knows what has happened to you; He knows your injuries, your joys, your hurts, your delights. The Apostle Peter twice uses a compound word of God – the heart-knower². He knows your heart and holds you in his love – for that is his nature.

The Hebrew word for shepherd literally means “lover of the flock.” The Lord God loves his people – the great flock. He loves each subsection of the flock down to us here today and to each individual. He is the lover of the flock.

¹ John 10:

² Acts 1:24, 15:8

God provides for you

“I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters.”³



The shepherd’s task is to bring the sheep to grass and water. David says that God will do that task well. He will bring us to pasture, not just dry grass stalks but the best – green pasture and still water which his sheep can drink and be refreshed. God knows our needs and commits himself to provide them. Jesus taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.”⁴ The sheep’s role is to follow and to trust the shepherd, not to worry whether the shepherd knows where to find grass or water. That provision should not be confused with great wealth, rather it is the confidence in the Lord to provide. And out of that comes contentment and peace. That may be the secret of the

joy and contentment we see in our friends in Kondoa in spite of their few possessions.

To lie down in green pastures

Philip Keller⁵ explained that sheep will not lie down if any of these conditions exist:

- fear of predators;
- friction with others in the flock;
- aggravating flies and pests;
- hunger.

We will grow in confidence of the Lord’s protection of us from evil. Phillip Keller notes that rivalry in the flock subsides when the shepherd is present. So too, our petty envies and differences pale into insignificance in the presence of Jesus.



God restores you

David continues,

“He restores my soul.”

When a sheep is cast, it has fallen on its back and cannot get up again unaided. This is a great danger since it can die in a matter of hours in the hot sun even if it is not attacked by predators. Shepherds count their sheep - not to get to sleep at night but - to be sure none is missing. If so, there will follow a hunt to find it before it is too late.

We can be cast down too:

Psalm 42:11 “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.”

We can fall into sin or get trapped by circumstances needing to be rescued and stood back up on our feet again. The shepherd does not want to punish or kill that sheep, the idea is to restore it and so too with our shepherd. He restores our soul.

The reasons sheep are vulnerable to being cast are:

- Lying in a hollow of soft ground and accidentally rolling onto their backs;
- an excessive fleece.



³ Ps 23:1b-2

⁴ Mt 6:11

⁵ “A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23”, Philip Keller, 1993, Inspirational Press, p34.

- being too fat.

We could draw some parallels for the Christian life.⁶

Lying in a soft hollow: Too often we choose the easy way, the comfortable place without hardship, no need for self-discipline or endurance. There is a valuable discipline in having to endure, to push through, to go without.

Excessive fleece: The heavy fleece is likely to be dirty with manure, mud, burrs, tics as well as being too hot. It could be likened to our flesh life with the accumulations of things and dirt weighing us down. Worldly ideas drag our thinking and spirits down and so then our emotions as well. A sheep may need urgent shearing to relief the load. And what a relief for us after the master has applied the blade of the Word to cut away some aspect of the flesh life!

Too Fat: We may be fat by way of self-satisfaction or status or wealth. We may think we have arrived and be unwilling to take risks for the Kingdom anymore. Our shepherd may need to restore our souls from these threats to our spiritual safety.

He restores our souls.

I am going to stop at that point for now and continue next time I preach. But let us recall the main points so far.

Jesus is the good shepherd promised to Israel, but also shepherd of all other peoples. Psalm 23 tells us that God himself shepherds the believer intimately.

- He knows you.
- He cares for you.
- He provides for you.
- He restores you.

Will you ponder these things? Will you allow them to sink into the depths of your heart. Will you make the choice to trust the Bible in what it tells us and so build on this good foundation?

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⁶ Acknowledgement to Phillip Keller for these ideas.