

## The Lord's My Shepherd

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday of Easter, April 28, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

The Bible has many names for Jesus Christ. Various pictures are painted to describe Him. He is referred to as King, Deliverer, Rock, and Shield. There are more intimate metaphors. He's called Father and Friend. One of the most intimate of all is the word Shepherd.

Few passages in the Bible are more beloved than the Twenty Third Psalm. I've read it at nearly every memorial service I've conducted. These simple words written 3000 years ago by David, the shepherd boy from Bethlehem, have a way of touching our hearts and minds.

Picture him tending his sheep on a Bethlehem hillside. It's been a long, hard day. He was up before dawn. He has guided his flock along the rugged terrain they've been grazing. He's been on the lookout for wild animals and any stray sheep. Finally he comes to a familiar watering hole. There, by those calm, still waters, fed by an underground spring, the sheep drink and then rest in the shade of some olive trees. Protected from the noon-day sun, David leans back against the trunk of a tree, pulls out a little flute from his knapsack and begins to play. Then, in the loneliness, which is the life-style of just about every shepherd anywhere, David begins to sing a song about his life. More than that, it's a song about the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who would someday reveal Himself as the Messiah Christ. In the clear voice of a deeply religious, Jewish youth he sings:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Then he changes his metaphor from that of shepherd. He begins to muse about the family at home. The shepherd's job is lonely. He yearns for the family reunion. He sees his father and mother at the table surrounded by brothers and sisters. He pictures all the work his parents go through to provide food for their family. He sings on:

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

This is one of my favorite passages of Scripture. This morning I just want to lift out one picture - that of the shepherd - and share some insights I believe will help us understand a little bit better the nature of the God who loves us, cares for us, and has come to us in Jesus Christ.

The picture of the shepherd boy David remains a contemporary picture. When we were in Palestine two years ago I saw shepherds, often young Arab boys working alone, leading their sheep and goats. What's remote to our experience here in the United States has been a constant in Middle Eastern life. That's why Jesus felt so at home in talking about shepherds and sheep as recorded in John 10. That's why so many analogies are made all through the Scriptures to sheep and shepherds. Jesus knew Himself to be the Good Shepherd, even as years before David attributed that quality to the Lord.

Christians believe that the Lord is a Good Shepherd. There are bad shepherds. Some shepherds don't really care for their sheep. They may be hirelings, people who are employed to take care of sheep that belong to somebody else. They don't really care about the sheep

as long as they get paid. The Lord is a Good Shepherd. Jesus says that the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The good shepherd is a guide. The good shepherd is a provider. The good shepherd is a physician. The good shepherd is a protector.

David pictured himself and God's people as sheep. That's not necessarily a complimentary picture of us. Sheep have a mass mind. There's a certain mob instinct. They tend to be fearful. Sheep are timid. Sheep are stubborn. Sheep, at times, act stupidly. David put a mirror to himself. Years later, in all of his sophistication as king, he could look back on all of these attributes in himself, and he could see them in others. Jesus, 1000 years later, realized that we, his people, have some of those same characteristics which get us into a lot of trouble.

Let's look more closely at one phrase in the Twenty Third Psalm.

"The Lord is my shepherd". We believe that the God of whom the Old Testament speaks has come to us in Jesus to shepherd us, to bring us home to the Father. There's a great passage in the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel where the Lord is really ticked off at the leaders of his people, both ministers and kings. The Lord says to Ezekiel, "Prophecy against the shepherds of Israel, say to them, 'You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost.'" And then the Lord says, "I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I will seek the lost, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak." And that's exactly what Christians believe happened with the coming of Christ. The Risen Lord continues to seek out and find his lost sheep throughout the world.

Jesus once told a parable of a shepherd who had a 100 sheep. One got lost. Maybe it wasn't paying attention and got left behind when the rest of the flock moved on. Maybe it was curious and decided to go off by itself to explore and got lost. Maybe it was like a lot of us and just didn't listen to the voice of the shepherd and got lost. Maybe it was flatly disobedient and defiant and so got lost. By itself a sheep is practically helpless and a prey to all sorts of dangers. The good shepherd, Jesus said referring to himself, leaves the 99 sheep and goes searching for the one lost sheep until its found.

Christians believe that God has come to us in Jesus Christ to do just that. God has come to us to seek out us and all his lost sheep. It well may be that there are hundreds of planets in our universe with intelligent life. Hundreds or thousands of planets circling distant stars each with creatures who know, love, and obey the Lord of the universe and live in perfect harmony with one another without war, without poverty, without disease, without injustice. It may be that we, on planet earth, are the only creatures who rebelled against the Lord. We may be the only intelligent creatures who turned our back on our creator thus threatening to destroy our planet with <sup>our</sup> war and violence and pollution. But we believe that the Lord who created the universe has come to us. I believe the second person in the Holy Trinity has become a human being to seek out and save his lost sheep whom he has created in his own image.

It's so important for us to see the Lord of the universe as our shepherd. I urge you not to believe in a God in general, a generic god... a creator god who has gone off some place to let the universe run on its on. I urge us to trust only in the God who has come to us

in Jesus Christ. I urge us to read the Scripture and listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. I urge each of us not to be satisfied until we can say that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ - is our Shepherd. Amen.

Let us pray: O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.