

Psalm 23 (KJV)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

John 10:11-18 (NRSV)

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes⁵¹ 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. I have received this command from my Father."

We Smell Like Sheep

While Marthalyn was home for Spring break, we had the opportunity to make our first visit to the "Wildest Place in Town," the Buffalo Zoo. Now, it was just the second week of March, so understandably, the Zoo was not in full swing. It was a chilly, but sunny day when we yearned to be outside. We both love zoos, we had a lot to catch up on, and thought it would be a grand place to talk and walk the afternoon away, all while seeing some of the many amazing creatures of God's world. So, we enjoyed watching the sea lions swimming, peeking in at the elephants, laughing at the interaction between the playful polar bears and some delighted children, and watching the arctic foxes sleeping in the sunshine. We were amazed at the volume of the howler monkey and the beauty of exotic birds in the rain forest building. We listened to a professor teaching students about giraffes and their habitat, and I do believe the lions (separated by gender with the females outdoors and a male indoors) may have been in heat!

Then Marthalyn and I began a deep conversation about her future, and I started paying less attention to my surroundings, and more attention to our subject matter. Even so, as soon as we walked into a particular building, I could tell from the distinct aroma that we were in the presence of gorillas! We spent about 20 minutes observing the interactions of the gorillas within their habitat with many fun play structures. After

leaving the building we both took a deep cleansing breath, and left the aroma of the gorillas behind.

For shepherds, especially those following the model of the Good Shepherd, it is not so easy to leave the aroma of the sheep behind! The Good Shepherd abides with the sheep. The shepherd is not merely a passing on-looker, as Marthaln and I were as we observed the gorillas. The Shepherd spends a lot of quality time with the sheep. The shepherd provides that which will satisfy the hunger and thirst of the sheep, which often requires moving the herd from one place to another. The shepherd does what is necessary to minimize the threats to the health and wellbeing of the sheep: parasites, worms and insects, briars and nettles, and predators of all kinds.

Now admittedly, the shepherd metaphor is rather foreign in our cyber-world of daily experience. But for these ancient folks, the food on their tables, the clothes on their backs, and their family honor was inexorably linked to the way they cared for their flock.

The practice of many nomadic shepherds of biblical times was to combine a couple of herds of sheep during the day. During times of grazing and finding water still enough to keep the drinking sheep from drowning, shepherds would combine their labor force to guide and watch over the sheep. As evening approached, the shepherds would lead the sheep back to their sheepfold, dividing the herds by merely calling to them, whistling for them, or making whatever sound that shepherd had made a familiar call for their particular sheep. As the sheep would enter the pen, the shepherd would spend a little time with each one, checking it for scrapes and insect bites, and applying healing oil as needed. Then, when all of the sheep were in the pen, the shepherd would literally sit or lay down in the pen opening, becoming the gate. If a predator were to try to enter the pen, it would need to pass by the shepherd first.

As you can tell from that very brief description of shepherding, the shepherds literally lived with the sheep. As you can imagine, they all then smelled pretty similar! And why shouldn't they. The scripture passages we have heard today, along with dozens of other passages employing imagery of shepherds and sheep, are about an intimate relationship between God and the flock, between the flock and the shepherd. Many of Jesus' followers would have been familiar with the prophetic descriptions of what a caring and skillful shepherd is, and is not. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah all described what a good shepherd is, and contrasted that with the worthless shepherds who neglect, exploit, and scatter the flock. The promised messiah would lead God's people with care for the most vulnerable, and providing for the flock's every need. The Psalms remind us that most of what King David learned about leading a nation in good times and when in need of deliverance, he learned through his experience as a shepherd. Thus, they realized that the very spiritual survival of their nation hinged on the quality of work done by their leaders.

So, when Jesus begins describing himself as the "Good Shepherd," his followers knew clearly that he was describing himself as a humble leader, one whose attention was tuned-in to providing for the flock, one who was willing to even give his very life in order to protect their wellbeing. The Greek word translated as "good" (*kalos*) does not mean

“morally good,” but rather, “real and proper” or “true.” Jesus is saying, “I am the true shepherd” or “I am the genuine shepherd.”

It is interesting that in the sentence which immediately precedes Jesus identifying himself as the good shepherd is the statement: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Or, as *The Message* states it: “I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.” And what is that “abundant life?” For John, our gospel writer, it is a life of love and intimacy with God.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and has modeled for us the way we are to lead within the human family. At different times and stages and settings in our lives, we each have times when we are sheep, relying on shepherds God has sent to us. We also each have times when we are called to shepherd another, or a flock—great or small. So, you see, we are all sheep (and smell that way) and we all have the opportunity to be shepherds. And if we do that well, we will still smell like sheep! Rev. James Howell reminds us that ***“to become a good shepherd is to come out of the shell of selfishness to be attentive to those for whom we are responsible, to reveal to them their fundamental beauty and value and help them grow and become fully alive.”***

In order to do that, following Jesus’ example and scriptural description, we must focus on listening, caring, facing our own fears, and seeking the healing, restoration, and strengthening of the wounded and vulnerable ones. We must be willing to spend a lot of quality time even with those, especially with those, who smell like sheep: those who are learning to trust, those who struggle with responsibility, those who don’t pay attention to staying on the path, and those who would rather be alone, even in the midst of the predators. And while this congregation has done that kind of shepherding very well for many generations, we are also increasingly aware that the times, the culture, the needs, and the sheep of our community and world are constantly changing. So I thank God that those in roles of shepherding in the congregation are endeavoring to discern God’s vision for how we may adapt our shepherding to meet the changing needs of our neighbors, just as a shepherd must adapt their practices to care for sheep with different personalities, and lead appropriately for differing terrain and changing seasons. The question we must ask in the midst of that discernment is, “How is God equipping and calling us to provide ministries which enable all to grow in a loving and intimate relationship with Christ, revealing each one’s beauty and value, and nurturing all to grow and become fully alive?”

Captain William Swensen was deployed to Afghanistan on September 8, 2009 when he was on duty protecting a caravan of Afghani officials going to a meeting. The caravan was ambushed, and true to his training, Captain Swensen jumped into action to rescue the wounded and pull out the dead. As the medevac helicopter arrived, the GoPro camera on a medic’s helmet captured the action. It showed Captain Swensen rush in under enemy fire to help a soldier who had been shot in the neck. While speaking reassuring words, keeping pressure on the wound, and dragging the soldier’s body toward the helicopter, one could witness the formation of a deep bond of care. After Captain Swensen had placed the soldier in the helicopter, he leaned over and kissed the soldier on the forehead. *They both smelled like sheep!* In that very

challenging environment, those with a deep relationship with One greater than self, engage in doing remarkable things ~ even risking one's own safety to save another.

I pray that when folks come into this building, or see a group of us in action in the community, that we will hear the comment, "they smell like sheep." 'For that is the ultimate compliment to those who follow the Good Shepherd! May we smell like sheep!

So, here is your assignment: First identify a person or group for whom you are concerned right now. At least once each day for this entire week, use the Psalm prayer in the bulletin which is based on Psalm 23, to uplift that person or group in prayer. Then, before you come to worship next week, consider how your feelings about the person, group, or situation have changed over this period of focused prayer. And may we smell like sheep!

PSALM PRAYER FOR HEALING AND RESTORATION

The Lord is (*Name's*) shepherd, they shall not want.

God makes (*Name*) lie down in green pastures;

Leads (*Name*) beside still waters; God restores (*Name's*) soul.

God leads (*Name*) in right paths for God's own name's sake.

Even though we walk through the darkest valley, we fear no evil;
For you, God, are with us; your rod and your staff – they comfort us.

You prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies;
You anoint (*Name's*) head with oil; their cup of blessings overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow (*Name*) all the days of their lives,
And we shall dwell in the house of the Lord our whole lives long. Amen.

Shepherd God, Give us your great heart with which to love,
especially when our own hearts are too small and limited
to love as another needs to be loved.

Give us all we need to reach out to those who are lost and in trouble.
Give us the love and courage to give ourselves totally to the mission of Jesus,
the Good Shepherd who laid down his life
so that we would have life in its fullness. Amen.