

1 John 3:16-24 The Lord Is My Shepherd . . .  
Psalm 23  
John 10:11-18  
April 21, 2024

For us, and for our contemporaries, reading and interpreting the bible involves a massive context shift from the time and circumstances of its writing, to the time and circumstances of our reading. The more I study it, I have come to believe that the most prominent feature of the shift is the transition from agricultural to industrial life.

Most of the people in the world nowadays, live in cities and work at jobs having little to do with agriculture. And the technologies we know are very different, and have changed the way people live their daily lives from the moment they awake in the morning until they lie down at night.

We deal with cars and computers and electricity; with manufactured everything right down to our shoe laces and the buttons on our shirts. We are learning more and more about binary code and artificial intelligence. And we deal with many of the world's problems like poverty and war and disease on a much larger scale, than in the past.

For instance, we not only learn about sickness because *we* get sick, or those who are closest to us, but we are confronted with universal statistics about how many people suffer cancer and heart disease, and Covid and how many die each year of influenza.

The numbers can be overwhelming. Most of the statistics just go over our heads because they are incomprehensible.

Did you know that there are over four million teachers in America alone? And almost five million nurses. It is hard to imagine. They make a good example for us to consider because we don't know them as a group, we know them uniquely as the ones who teach and care for us. Most of them know only their own unique experiences.

The world is very different today than it was only a few hundred, much less a few thousand years ago. One of the illustrations about God in the Bible is that of a shepherd along with the sheep, and we must examine it for a minute or two, because most of us do not live around them, and don't know firsthand what they are like, sheep and shepherds, to live around.

It is found not only in the psalms but in the prophets as well, and in gospel parables. It illustrates more than one reality. In the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, for instance, we read;

“We all like sheep, have gone astray, each one of us turned to his own way.”

In the Parable of the Lost Sheep in The Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who had one hundred sheep. One was lost, and the shepherd left the other ninety-nine to find it. Upon its rescue, he rejoiced greatly.

Thus we learn from the same metaphor about both human frailty, weakness, and vulnerability, we are like lost sheep, and the intrinsic value of every person in the sight of God.

In the reading from the Gospel of John for the day, we find on the lips of Jesus one of the titles he gives himself, which is one of the examples on the list of, “I Am,” sayings in John; the Bread of Life, the Living Water, the True Vine, the Light of the World, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, Truth, and the Life. Here we read, “I am the Good Shepherd,” and he speaks of laying down his life for his sheep.

The image refers to one who protects, provides for, and gives direction to, and in the end would sacrifice for the sheep. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus is presented as the Lamb of God slain for the sins of all the people in the world. One can see the similarity. (I do not want to fail to mention the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew, but that is another thing altogether).

It illustrates an early conviction of the church about God, revealed in Jesus, particularly the crucified and raised Jesus; that in his life and teachings, death and resurrection, we learn about God, and about our humanity.

One might wonder that if it wasn't for the Bible and Jesus making such prolific use of the shepherding metaphor, few people these days would know how meek and easily guided and lead astray sheep can be,

or how dedicated and self-sacrificing are the good shepherds.

Perhaps the most well-known example of the shepherding image comes, however, from the psalms, and we prayed it together this morning in the Call to Worship. It is Psalm 23. Let us think of these six verses as an outline of an interpretation of life.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake”

This is the beginning of what is perhaps the most well-known psalm, and one of the most beloved texts in the bible. It begins by speaking of the goodness of life, and the nurturing care of the one who has given it.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.”

The psalm goes on to tell us that this wonderful life takes place in a world that can be dangerous. “The Valley of the Shadow of death,” is a thought provoking idea that tells us not to expect everything to be good all the time. And it hints that the end of this life is death, and in order to have a healthy understanding of things we should be aware of all the risks, and the fact of mortality, *as well* as the Lord's presence through every experience.

“Thy rod and they staff, they comfort me.”

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And we are introduced to the biggest problem we face, the universal problem of relationships, both in the small, interpersonal sense, and in the larger context of the world’s group dynamics.

I suppose there has always been war and poverty and disease, and God bless us all, we would eliminate them if we could, but we don’t know how; and from the beginning there has been murder and theft and deceit, anger and greed and fear. It is the one common feature in life that no one escapes, that we share with the ancients, that the problematic side of is real, and in the end everyone dies without having it solved.

And *that* hasn’t changed. No advancement in technology or knowledge shows promise in this regard, is able to help with the basic moral problem in life. And so one more way in which we can relate to the biblical past is that we know the meaning of sin. And one more way in which God has cared for us is the Lord’s discipline, which is accepted because it is given in redeeming love.

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

What is more, this coming together of life’s peaceful wonders and all the dangerous risks can be seen as a *feast* prepared in the presence of enemies. The overall

conclusion is that the good far outweighs the bad, and in the end all is well.

The psalm concludes with one of the best Easter proclamations in the Old Testament;

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The psalm is an interpretation of life, from its confidence in life’s goodness to its risk and danger, to the human responsibility for the enmity found between people and nations, to the caring and redeeming presence God in every situation. It all leads to the conclusion that God’s grace is always near; in creation, in life’s pursuits and experiences, in failure and defeat as well as victory, in redemption, in death, and in eternity.

The epistle reading reflects these ideas and gives us our marching orders. The reading begins, “this is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us . . .” like a *good* shepherd.

“And this is his command, “to believe in the name of his son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded.”

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