The Shepherd

Psalm 23 and John 21 (excerpts)

A poem about comfort and trust, the 23rd Psalm is something that many of us can say by heart, something that we learned in our childhoods. Because of its soothing nature, it’s a passage of scripture that we turn to in times of distress, grief and fear. Maybe some of you have found yourselves repeating the words in your head while you’ve been staying at home, maybe worrying about loved ones, or finding yourselves a bit more anxious in these trying days. It’s a lovely, life-affirming and hopeful poem.

At the United Church of Christ General Synod in 2007, Lynn Redgrave, who was a member of a nearby UCC congregation, was one of the keynote speakers. She spoke about her personal journey with cancer, and ended her talk by reading the 23rd Psalm. It was the loveliest and most moving reading of the psalm that I’ve ever heard. If you want to hear her read it, go online to YouTube, and search for *Lynn Redgrave 23rd Psalm*. You’ll be delighted.

But I find, as often happens with poems or prayers or songs with which we are very familiar, sometimes I fall into an old, familiar cadence as I repeat the words by rote, and it’s easy to miss the meaning. So I did a mash up of some contemporary translations of the Bible, along with some of my own words, to give us a fresh hearing of a familiar text.

*God, like a good shepherd, cares for me always. There is not a single thing that I need.*

*The shepherd creates a lovely space where I can rest and rejuvenate, it’s a lush meadow, next to a spring of fresh, clear, cool water. I can catch my breath, clear my head, and find my true self again.*

*The shepherd reminds me of what is really important in this life, and calls me back to God’s dreams for me.*

*When there are days when I am frightened, confused, stuck or lost, or I feel like death itself is chasing me down, the shepherd is nearby, nudging me in the right direction, and reminding me that I am not alone.*

*Even when all of my old enemies – fear, doubt, jealousy, selfish pride, inadequacy, stubbornness, all of my self-serving worst instincts rear their ugly heads, the shepherd takes me by the hand and leads me to a feast that nurtures my body and my soul.*

*The shepherd knows all of my needs, and with sweet-smelling oils, touches my head to give me even more .blessings. I am filled to overflowing with contentment and with grace.*

*God’s love and goodness will pursue me every day in which I draw breath, and in end, will fill me with peace.*

It was a fascinating exercise, playing with those words, looking up as many translations and paraphrases as I could find, and re-writing it until it really resonated and found a resting place deep inside of me. That’s your homework assignment for this week. Sit down and re-write the 23rd Psalm, using words and imagery that touch your soul, and describe your resting place, and name your enemies. I think you’ll be surprised and delighted with the result.

I want to push the shepherd metaphor a bit further. To do that, I turn to the last chapter of the Gospel of John, one of our resurrection stories. In it, Peter, fresh from having denied even knowing Jesus, let alone being one of his followers, had returned to the Galilee, along with others of the disciples, after Jesus’ death. Not knowing what else to do with himself, he went fishing, and the others went with him.

The resurrected Jesus was waiting for them on the beach, with breakfast ready on the grill, when they returned to the shore at daybreak. After breakfast, and almost like an echo of Peter’s denial just a few nights earlier, Jesus asked Peter three times, “do you love?” When Peter said “yes,” Jesus’ reply was simple. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

We are not just the sheep of God’s flock, we are also meant to be shepherds.

In our incarnational theology, we claim that God exists in human flesh, in the fullness of the human experience. If we believe that, then in that there is great comfort and also awesome responsibility.

The comfort comes in knowing that God is present with us, among us, within us, between us, that God’s love and grace are in our very breath, and that all the possibilities of God’s grace and goodness — the possibilities of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of love, of real intimacy and connection with one another — can be experienced, can be lived. The responsibility comes in helping to make all of that happen.

If God exists in human flesh, then God exists in us, and we are the creators of God’s peaceable realm, God’s world of justice, God’s heart of caring. It is up to us, ultimately, as the bearers of God’s grace and goodness, to be that protecting, caring, nurturing, guarding, tender shepherd of which David sang.

In our communities of faith, we have made a covenant, a sacred promise to one another, to care for each other, to support one another, celebrate and to grieve together, to make this earth-bound journey as rich and as meaningful as we possibly can. Perhaps what this means is that we are the Good Shepherds for one another. Perhaps we can understand our covenant through the language of this psalm.

When I am weary and sick in my soul, will you lead me to a quiet meadow, where there is cool water to drink? When you are threatened and overcome and beaten down by an oppressive system or bad luck or your own personal demons, will I feed you and nurture you and anoint your feverish brow with encouragement and support?

When any of us faces any of human heartaches of loss or death or betrayal or despair, will we be protecting shepherd’s rod and staff, will we reach down to lift each other out of the valley of shadows of death and fear?

We are living with, for most of us, unprecedented uncertainty. How can we shepherd, guard, and tend to one another in the midst of this pandemic? Phone calls and video conferencing, shopping and delivering food, wearing masks and writing letters, making donations to groups that are on the front lines, providing assistance to the most vulnerable among us, these are all good ways to care for each other right now.

And when we are able to emerge from our safe-at-home spaces, we’ll once again find ways to care for each other, that are face to face as well as heart to heart.

As we walk journey together as companions on the road, let us fear no evil, no danger, for God is with us, made manifest in the love, protection and support we provide to each other and to our hurting world. Emmanuel, God is with us. Amen.