God as Our Shepherd

Spring Quarter: God Loves Us
Unit 2: God’s Caring, Saving, and Upholding Love

Sunday school lesson for the week of April 2, 2017
By Dr. Hal Brady

Lesson scripture: Psalm 23

The Old Testament is almost a distant memory in the hearts and minds of modern humankind. Those sacred stories that meant so much to our fore parents are becoming more and more lost to us. How many of the commandments actually command us?

Yet in the midst of all this, there is one masterpiece that has not been touched by our neglect. It’s been called the “Nightingale of the Psalms – the brightest jewel of the Psalms.” It sounds sweetest when the times are darkest.

Next to the Lord’s Prayer, the 23rd Psalm is probably the best known passage of scripture in all the Bible. It’s requested more at funerals than any other psalm. It is read more as a devotional aid than any other psalm. It is memorized more than any other Psalm. And it is absolutely uncanny how this psalm still addresses our latest fears.

As you can see, the 23rd Psalm is special. Here, the psalmist promises that God’s love provides what is necessary to confront any difficulties and to live in a fulfilling and intimate relationship with God.

The psalmist’s opening statement, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” actually has an even more intimate quality than we may recognize. As scholars point out, what we translate “the Lord” is not a title for God as it appears. Rather, the psalmist is using the name of God – Yahweh. This very personal testimony, therefore, begins with a very personal reference to God.

If, Then

If the Lord is my shepherd, then what does that make me? One of the unique patterns of Scripture is that God is consistently revealed in relational terms – Father, Savior, Redeemer, Lord, King, Creator, Teacher, etc. These are all terms that suggest a relationship. And as we are reminded, one hallmark of the Bible’s relational terms for God is that they all have counterparts.

Creator suggests creature. Lord implies servant. Teacher invites student. The terms we use for God say something about us. Therefore, in terms of our scripture lesson, if the Lord is my shepherd, then I must be a sheep.

What can we say about our being a sheep? First, to be a sheep suggests a tendency to follow, though not necessarily a discriminating tendency. We human beings like to think of ourselves as being more independent than a sheep, but an honest assessment of ourselves reveals otherwise. We tend to follow the pack. What we wear, what we buy, what we drive, how we spend our money are
all heavily influenced by what we observe those around us doing. We tell our children, “I don’t care what other parents do,” but we do care. In a real sense, we do care what other parents, families, fellow employees, and neighbors do.

Second, to be a sheep also suggests tremendous vulnerability! I simply can’t imagine another animal less able to deal with its predators. A sheep is not known for its blazing getaway speed, its strong tail, or its protective shell. Nor is a sheep known for its ferocious teeth, its great size or its defensive odor. The truth is, sheep are defenseless, helpless and timid. And while we human beings are not so defenseless, we do acknowledge our vulnerability every time we observe how fragile life really is.

Finally, to be a sheep is to be dependent! Scholars inform us that wild sheep may be able to get by on their own, but the domesticated sheep that this psalmist had in mind were pretty much helpless without their shepherds. Food, drink, shelter, health, and protection were all provided by a good shepherd. And apart from the shepherd’s providential care, the sheep were in a desperate state.

Important point! Underline it! The psalmist gladly claimed the Lord as his Shepherd. By so doing, he acknowledged his own similarities to a sheep. And aren’t these same similarities also true of us? We tend to follow. We are vulnerable. And we are learning more and more how much we depend on our Shepherd.

**So Great a Cloud**

Psalm 23 has been associated with David from ancient times, and his authorship is easy for us to imagine. We know that David grew up as a shepherd boy (1 Samuel 16:11) and that his experience as a shepherd contributed to his willingness to face Goliath (17:34-37). In addition, when David’s heart had hardened with sin, it was a story about a lamb that broke through and spoke to him (2 Samuel 12:1-6). And so it is not difficult for us to hear about a tender, strong, and caring shepherd coming from both David’s experience with sheep and his experience with God.

And yet, as scholars remind us, David’s is far from being the only voice on this subject. The image of the Lord as a shepherd is in both the Old and New Testaments. Even though shepherds were often disrespected (Genesis 46:34), still the Lord is unapologetically associated with the group and their work.

We are told that the prophets portray both God and the promised Messiah as a shepherd for the people (Isaiah 40:10-11; Ezekiel 34:11-23; Micah 5:2-4). Then Jesus himself suggests the Lord as a shepherd in his teachings about a lost sheep (Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:3-7). He also claims for himself that title of “The Good Shepherd” (John 10:11, 14). And, then, the writer of Hebrews identifies Jesus as “the great shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:20). As scholars make clear, the imagery of Psalm 23, therefore, is part of a larger theme about the nature of God’s relationship with people.

Moving ahead, both the Old and New Testaments recognize that not all shepherds are created equal. There are good shepherds and bad shepherds. For a moment we’ll focus on the bad shepherds. In Jeremiah, the Lord decries those bad shepherds – that is the human leaders “who destroy and scatter
the sheep of my pasture” (Jeremiah 23:1). In Ezekiel, those bad shepherds are condemned for both exploiting and neglecting the sheep (Ezekiel 34: 2-8). And likewise, Jesus criticizes the hireling who does not care for the sheep, and therefore does not protect them (John 10:12-13). So much for bad shepherds.

On the other hand, if the author of Psalm 23’s own experience, as a shepherd or exposure to shepherds, had been negative he might have been hesitant to use this image for the Lord. But as it is, it is clear that this author perceived the shepherd to be a source of protection, care and faithfulness, and so it is a beautiful and appropriate metaphor for God.

If the Shepherd is Good

Many of us have been part of a worship service or fellowship setting where the leader has declared, “God is good,” and the people have responded, “All the time.” Then, in turn, the leader reports, “All the time,” and the people echo, “God is good.” It is a popular affirmation that we have heard and seen numerous times.

Scholars remind us that the theology of this simple statement is sound. Jesus asserts the fundamentals and incomparable goodness of God (Luke 18:19), and both Testaments avow that the divine nature is unchanging (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8).

Regarding that same simple refrain – “God is good; all the time; all the time; God is good” – the question has been raised concerning how people might respond if it were instead a fill-in-the-blank statement. If the folks, both inside and outside of the church, were given a piece of paper that read, “All the time _______ is good,” what would they write in the blank? What do we experience or affirm as good all the time?

As suggested it certainly wouldn’t be life. Even if we realize how wonderfully blessed we are in life, we still know that life is fragile and often unfair. Sometimes life can be downright cruel. Some of that has been experienced in the recent tornadoes in South Georgia and other places.

Now, the psalmist knew that life is not good all the time. To be sure, he experienced goodness and blessing, but even in the brevity of his testimony he acknowledged the danger and difficulties of life. Yet in the midst of it all, God is always good. The pastures may not always be green, but God is always good. The circumstances may not always be the best, but God is always trustworthy. Even while passing through the darkest valley, there is no need to fear because God is always good and with us. In fact, the Lord is my shepherd.

Because the Lord is my Shepherd

In my studies of this psalm, I have never forgotten what Dr. Albert Shirkey, former past of Mount Vernon Place, said about it in his book “The Lord is My Shepherd.” He said, “You will notice that the phrase, ‘I shall not want’ runs through it like a golden cord binding it all together.” So we asked, “I shall not want for what?” The psalmist answers, “the all sufficiency of God.”
It is because the Lord’s my Shepherd that I shall not want. The specifics of the psalm are the following: I shall not want for rest, for guidance, for comfort or for eternal security.

Someone asked Robert Browning, “What is the one theme in all your poems most representative of you and who you are? Browning replied, “I am very sure about God.”

So was the psalmist and so can we be, by faith. The Lord is Our Shepherd.

**Action Plan**

1. What does it mean for you to say that the Lord is your shepherd? Please discuss among class members.
2. When do you see expressions of the psalmist’s trust in the shepherd?

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