

The Fourth Sunday of Easter - Year B
May 3, 2009
The Reverend Rob P. Travis

“His Rod And His Staff, They Comfort Me”

Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

“Though (we) walk through the valley of the shadow of death, (we) shall fear no evil; for you are with (us); your rod and your staff, they comfort (us).”

Be with us now, Good Shepherd, and help us to hear what we need to hear. Amen.

It is no accident that Jesus describing himself as the Good Shepherd. It is read on the same Sunday as that beloved of all Psalms, “The Lord is My Shepherd.”

(Not that many of you thought it was an accident, but I figured there may be some who did not see that connection. Don't worry, you're forgiven. I just hope I can help you see the connection, and understand it deeply.)

Jesus saying, “I am the Good Shepherd,” was meant to remind people of that Psalm. Just as Peter in the reading from Acts used the Psalms to describe Jesus as “the Stone the Builders rejected which has become the chief cornerstone.” That was from Psalm 118.

Jesus was referring to Psalm 23 when he said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” The Psalms were beloved among the Holy Scriptures just as they are in the church today. I went to the Abbey of the Gethsemani for a retreat after Easter. There the monks, much like Christian monks and nuns all around the world, chant the psalms in church seven times each and every day. They are like the most basic prayer book of our Faith, which is probably because, there is probably a psalm for every human emotion, nearly every experience.

Jesus knew the psalms, and saw in them. Many signs which pointed to him as the Lord, Prophecies, out of a book of poems, songs, laments and prayers.

When Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd,” the people he spoke to immediately thought,

“The Lord is my Shepherd.” That's why the leaders of the temple got so upset with him a few verses later because they knew by saying, “I am the Good Shepherd.” Jesus was basically saying, “I am the Lord.”

In case you're wondering, this is one of the many places you can point to, when people say falsely, “Jesus never said he was God. He's just a great human teacher.” He is not, Jesus is

the Lord, and he explains why his place as Lord makes him different to follow, than any other religious leader.

What we have today, between the psalm and the Gospel is a rare, and interesting juxtaposition. There is a side-by-side comparison between God's perspective and our perspective on the relationship we have with God. The psalm is written from the perspective of the believer, likened to a sheep of God's fold, and Jesus is talking about what he sees as God as the Shepherd of the flock.

I'm going to bounce back and forth between them so we can get a full picture of the relationship between the Lord God and us, the people of God. As a sheep in the fold of God, our needs are provided for. He gives us the nourishment for our bodies and souls that sustain us everyday. He leads us to those things that we truly need, for sometimes we get distracted by things which we do not need, or worse, which may be harmful to us. We simply need to heed his call and follow where he guides us.

From Jesus' perspective, we follow Him, because He knows us, and we know Him. Just as the Father knows Jesus and Jesus knows his father. We belong to Jesus, the good shepherd, to his fold. And he protects us.

On the other hand, if you don't know Jesus, you can't follow Him because He will not seem that different to you from all the others who try to lead you. Coming to know Jesus personally is essential to following His way.

Mostly, the shepherd makes sure we have what we need and we live and enjoy life. We munch away at our lives and sometimes even get so caught up in what we are doing that we forget there is even a shepherd watching out for us. But he is also protecting us, even when we do not know we are in danger.

Most of the time, thank God, we are not aware of how perilous our lives are, how threatened we are by those who would steal, kill and destroy us. And I'm not talking about terrorists here, or even economic recessions. Though sometimes those things come about because of other sheep that have gone astray. No, I'm talking about the enemy we know exists, but whom we cannot see. Jesus describes the enemy as the wolf in this passage. And earlier, as the thief.

The psalm says, "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," and some of you can point to particular times in your lives when you felt like you were in that valley, perhaps you feel you're there even now. The truth is, there is not a sometimes in that verse. We're always walking through the valley of the shadow of death, whether we realize it or not.

We are surrounded by pitfalls, and many we know are mired in sin, as we have been from

time to time. This is not an easy world to live in, though we in this place have it easier than most in the world. The shadow of death is all around us. But because of the Good Shepherd, because of Jesus, we have no need to be afraid. Because Jesus the Lord is with us. Not only that, he has a rod, and a staff, which comfort us.

What are the rod and the staff? Some of you who maybe are more familiar with sheep husbandry than I am, may correct me, bBut I believe the staff is used to pull the sheep back from dangerous places, and to lead them in the right direction. The scriptures can do that for us as can great teachings from Christian tradition. Even deep prayer practices, can be a staff in Jesus' hand, holding us in the right way. Participating in the sacraments which restore our souls, and comfort us, can be ways that Jesus' staff prevents us from falling into peril. The rod is to beat off any predator that would harm the sheep. I believe the rod is mostly used without our knowledge.

I want to tell you a personal story about how I became aware of the rod of the Good Shepherd protecting me. You see, when I was little, every night before I went to bed, my father would say prayers with me at my bedside. After I said my prayers, he would give me his blessing and that blessing, always ended like this, "Send his guardian angel to watch over him and protect him from all the assaults of the enemy."

I often thought about what that meant but I did not become aware of it until I was an adult. I guess I kinda thought it was a nice thought to imagine that I had a guardian angel. And one time when I was little, my mom swore to me that it was my guardian angel that saved me from death or injury when the bike I was riding was hit and run over by a speeding car but that is a story for another time.

But a couple of years ago I went through a time when I could clearly say I was walking through the valley of the shadow of death. I began to be afraid like I was never afraid before. I was very sick, and in the hospital. When I was in the hospital I was alone for a long time and I have never felt so alone or so afraid. I was afraid I was going to die. This valley truly seemed like the shadow of death. And in the darkest moment in the middle of the night, when the fears were just overwhelming me, I saw a blue light right in front of my bed. My guardian angel revealed himself to me for the first time in my life, though he had been there all along. And like many angels we read about in scriptures, He said, "don't be afraid."

When he said that, I wasn't afraid anymore. I had met a Rod of the Good Shepherd that the psalmist spoke of, and he comforted me. This powerful being reassured me what somehow I already knew - That no evil could harm me because he was there to fight off

anything and everything that would try keep me from the love of God and His peace that passes all understanding.

I wasn't afraid anymore and I got better over time, but the reassurance that my guardian angel was with me never left me. I wasn't so sure I wanted to tell people about it, but when I was at the Abbey of Gethsemani a couple of weeks ago, the former abbot told me (and others) about meeting his guardian angel, and I told him about mine. I was reassured again, that it was not a unique experience. And I felt called to share it with you.

I was aware of walking through the valley of the shadow of death, and I experienced a rod of the Good Shepherd, in an almost literal way, beating from me the evil one who was assaulting me with fear. I hope most of you never are that scared that you would need to meet your guardian angels but I can tell you they are there with you and they work tirelessly to protect you from evil and to help you find the way to eternal life with God.

His rod and staff have comforted me and I know they will comfort you as well. But that is from our perspective when Jesus describes what it is like to be the Good Shepherd, he shows us how frustrating it must be to be in his shoes. Here we are munching away in the green pastures oblivious to the dangers around us and there are hired hands out there with us who think they can watch over us like the Good Shepherd. They seem good to us, seem right, but they are untried and they do not care about us the way the Good Shepherd does.

When I read that, I kept thinking about the popular spirituality that is all around us these days. From Oprah, to prosperity theology, from neo-paganism and nature worship to astrology, from new agey, self-help spirituality to sentimental angel worship. There is a revival of desire for spirituality and like most gluts of demand, the desire is being filled at least in part, by a lot of junk.

These shallow attempts at truth, promise to help us enjoy our lives, but Jesus sees through them. He tells us, they "who (are) not the shepherd and (do) not own the sheep, see the wolf coming and leave the sheep and run away"

Those baseless spiritualities of popular religion are not rooted in the ground of God's being and don't hold up under pressure. When true trouble comes, they leave us vulnerable and people find themselves abandoned and scared, maimed and even destroyed by the attacks of the enemy.

"-- and the wolf snatches them and scatters them."

"The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep."

That's why it is important to keep our attention on Jesus, and not inadvertently follow paths that are not inline with the Good Shepherd. Only the Good Shepherd has laid down

his life for us, conquered death and the grave, defeated the evil one, and continues to watch out for us, sending his faithful servants to help Him. Using his rod and his staff to comfort us. He knows us, and we know Him and though He will not entirely remove us from the enemy, while we are in this world, He sets a table before us, in the presence of those who would harm us. And if we pay attention, to his blessings, we will see that our cup runs over. Surely his goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives, even when we're not looking for them. But if we look for them, our lives will be enriched and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

There are angels watching out for us, defending us against evil we cannot see. There is abundant life laid out before us and there are people who try to mislead us. But we must keep our attention on the Good Shepherd, focus on Jesus, and deepen our knowledge of Him so that we won't mistake someone else for Him.

I want to share with you in a prayer - A version of Psalm 23, that I found comforting when I was in the hospital. It was given to me by the chaplain there.

Lord, you are my Faithful Shepherd,
You meet all my deepest needs.
You guide my weary heart to safe pastures,
And lead me beside peaceful waters.
You offer rest for my soul.
For the sake of your good name
You put my feet on the road to righteousness.
But even if I walk down desolate pathways
Of pain or sorrow, disease or death,
I won't be afraid.
For suffering has no victory
If you're with me.
Your presence is all the comfort and courage I need.
You give me reasons to celebrate
In spite of my trials.
You bless me with unexpected joy.
My heart overflows.
Your love and grace follow me
All the days of my life.
I'm grateful and secure knowing that you,
My faithful Shepherd,
Hold me in your Arms
And will never let me go.
Not now, Not ever. *Amen*