

*"The King of Love, my shepherd is...whose goodness faileth never...
I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine forever."*

As I have prepared to preach this week, the refrain of this hymn paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm has been caught in my mind. Admittedly, it has been a week when I needed a shepherd. Sometimes, in our contemporary 21st Century lives, I think we lose sight of what it means to be a shepherd. Shepherds live close to the earth and often sleep upon it; they are up close and personal not only about their sheep but also about dirt, and water, and where the grass grows green. They work long hours, with one mission: keep the flock well, make sure everyone remains intact, protect them from harm, ensure that no lone sheep gets lost. Shepherds know that sheep are gregarious, group-minded creatures who can be trusted to remain together...well, for the most part. But if one sheep gets separated, the shepherd knows it cannot make its way back on its own. That is not part of sheep-nature. A lost sheep needs the shepherd's attentive and familiar presence to locate it, to coax it back, to reassure both the sheep and the flock that they belong together.

It's a challenge, living in our smartphone attached, multi-tasking, technologically savvy world, to imagine being a simple, focused shepherd. But imagine with me, if you will, what it might be like to **have** a shepherd. Not a boss, a supervisor, a mentor, a peer, a friend, a colleague...not even a dearly beloved spouse: a real, actual shepherd. Someone who knows where we belong, whose we are, and without ever losing confidence in the flock to protect each other will go to all lengths to be sure that if we wander away, we will be brought back safely home, reconnected with our flock.

The Lord is my Shepherd.

In today's Psalm, the Lord is our Shepherd. In today's Gospel, we may be initially tempted to hear a story of healing. But, what I hear given to us in John's Gospel is the image of Jesus in the midst of shepherding. In the past two Sundays, we heard stories of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night, and of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well by day. But today, we hear the story of Jesus, the shepherd, who starts out with his flock and ends up recognizing, loving, liberating and returning one of his own fold to goodness and mercy. This Gospel message finds us in the midst of our Lenten wandering, for good reason.

The Gospel story begins somewhere familiar for most of us: a group is gathered together, walking from place to place and...upon encountering someone in need...wonders what someone did wrong to deserve the unhappy fate they have just observed. The conversation the disciples were having wasn't a nuanced question of theodicy...why do bad things happen to good people. It was a straightforward question of who was to blame: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" While its tempting to blame the disciples for their short-sightedness, I think that we are also part of that flock. It seems like whenever something bad happens, our human reaction is to try to pin-point a quick, unilateral cause: Was the person with a cancer diagnosis a smoker? Was there a family history of depression? Who had someone crossed in order to be treated so badly? Having someone or something to blame for another's bad situation gives our rational brain something to hang onto so that our emotional heart doesn't have to break a bit more standing in the raw empathy of another person's pain which could just as easily be our own. When we're with the herd, it's hard to imagine that we could be the one who gets lost.

Jesus, our shepherd, knows this.

If we listen to the Gospel story unfolding as the sheep that we are, we notice a few things about our shepherd:

- ***Our shepherd isn't willing to lose any one of us to blame and isolation.*** Jesus responds to the question raised quickly, and directly: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." This particular sheep, like all sheep, has a place and a purpose for the flock. Not only did Jesus insure this sheep didn't get written off as lost, both then and now, God's works are revealed through even this one sheep.
- ***Our shepherd has no problem getting dirty.*** In fact, Jesus' immediate response is to reach for the most basic of natural elements: dirt. And, wasting no resources, he moistens it with his own saliva and spreads it on the eyes of the blind person. Sit with that last image for a moment. *Jesus...fully human and fully divine...uses the most basic elements of this world and his own earthy humanness as the instruments which deliver divine healing.* Our shepherd is our healer and guide, providing the direction we need to experience transformation of the ordinary into lavish, healing love.
- ***Our shepherd does not leave us, even when others do.*** Even after he was healed, the man born blind wasn't recognized by his community; wasn't trusted by those in authority; wasn't supported by his family. Healing doesn't guarantee acceptance on the world's terms. It is Jesus, our shepherd who pursues the man who is cast out of community, not just to restore his sight but to restore him to love and fullness of community. The story doesn't stop at healing; divine love and grace pursues us.
- ***Our shepherd is persistent in seeking us out, and finding us.*** In the 23rd Psalm, the way we often recite it, we say "surely, goodness, and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..." but that Hebrew word we translate "follow" is not passive; it's more like the active word, "pursue." Our shepherd seeks us out, and pursues us with love and mercy as the goal, earnestly desiring our safe return to the flock, to the plentiful green pastures where we belong.

In today's psalm, we...the people of God...are the sheep of God's pasture. In today's Gospel, Jesus who is the Good Shepherd lives into this identity towards one, unnamed, socially outcast child of God who has been lost on the outskirts of his community, his family, and perhaps even his own sense of worth. In the earth-bearing hands of the Good Shepherd, healing is offered. In the hearing, going, cleansing, seeing there is renewal. In the sharing of that healing grace and mercy, there is transformation. In Jesus going back and seeking out the person who has been healed, there is recognition, belief and belonging.

But a question still lingers at the end of this story: "Surely, we are not blind are we?"

**If we think we don't need a shepherd, perhaps we are blind.
If we see like sheep, our eyes are opened.**

There is a paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm that I particularly love. Some of you may have heard it; it's by a composer named Marty Haugan. I won't sing the whole paraphrase for you, but the refrain he offers of this psalm appointed for today, which is so familiar to us, turns it from a pastoral image into a prayer:

Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my needs, from death into life.

In today's Good News, we are given the images and stories of Jesus, our shepherd. We wander this valley of life not as millions and billions of individual sheep going in our own directions, making even our divinely gifted, multi-tasking Shepherd's head spin. Although... as an aside...I'm pretty sure, sometimes we do seem that way! We are a flock, caring for each other. We use music and meals and mission work and ministry to keep each other near, to remind each other of the Good Shepherd's presence. You see, from the sheep's perspective we have each had our moment where we were brought from darkness into light; from isolation into community; from the valley of the shadow of death into the verdant pastures of abundant life. As we wander through the hills and valleys of this earth we call home, we look for our flock. When we find them, we do what we are called to do and care for each other. And always, because we are prone to wander, we rely on our shepherd whose goodness never fails us, whose tender love and mercy will pursue us, enfold us, and bring us home.

Shepherd us, O God, beyond our wants, beyond our needs, from death into life.

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A
March 26, 2017
Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
Sarah Kye Price, Seminarian