

4th Sunday of Easter April 17th 2016

Comforting Words

A Reflection by Peggy Jensen

Prayer: God, Jesus, thank you for being the good shepherd watching over me and all of us. You provide green pastures and still waters, for our comfort. You also promise to hold us in your hand and keep us safe. May the thoughts and words that we share bring us to a deeper understanding of what that means for us today. Amen

I am quite sure The 23rd Psalm is a favourite passage for you. What makes this Psalm so memorable? Did you learn it in Sunday School? Was it part of a significant memorial service? Have you repeated it in the dark hours of the morning or in a time of crisis? I have often recited it at a hospital bedside knowing the familiar words will be comforting. That is what I saw in the readings for today, comforting words that are familiar to us. In fact you probably have this psalm memorized, join me.

Psalm 23 New Revised Standard Version

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

The image of Shepherd is found in 3 of the scriptures for today. Gabriola Island has many shepherds who look after all these flocks of sheep. I thought I should check in with one shepherding family as part of my research for this message. I had a nice chat with Heather Gray. She said that Robert is really the shepherd. We have seen many paintings of Jesus the shepherd, for a moment think about Robert the shepherd, big, kind and gentle. At least that is how I have come to know him. I am sure you know other shepherds here on Gabriola. .

When Robert calls the sheep they know his voice, or at least that voice usually means food so they come running. When the Moms gather round the trough to feed, the lambs like to go off and play, they have a great time rolling down little hills. Heather said they have 51 new lambs so far. I have enjoyed seeing the new lambs on the farm on South Road, one day I stopped for pictures and the mother quickly steered the baby away from the fence and my threatening presence. Apparently they don't like strangers! They protect their own just as the shepherd

protects them. So using the Shepherd image for God and for Jesus is appropriate and meaningful, here on Gabriola and even for urban folk.

The Psalm is full of images and phrases we can relate to.

“I shall not want.” The God who is named and then addressed in Psalm 23 is trustworthy—with our lives, with our choices, with our fears and losses. Living out a fundamental attitude of trust is not something we do easily. Take time to think about all the gifts God provides. Life itself, community / communion with persons and all creation, also the capacity to feed, shelter, and cherish each person in community. We often have “wants” but do we need more?

The images in this psalm can be very calming. Perhaps you have used this Psalm for meditation. I recommend that you take the time to just sit quietly and let the images take over all the mind chatter: God is our shepherd... we are sheep lying in green pastures... being led by still waters and along straight paths,... being restored by rest...moving through dark valleys... relying on rod and staff for safety... sitting before a full meal.... Sitting with enemies and not being afraid.... Being anointed, watching one’s cup be filled to overflowing... dwelling safely... living in the house of God.

We can all relate to the 23rd Psalm. It is no wonder that this is best known biblical text!

The readings for the fourth Sunday of Easter witness to the church’s conviction that the shepherd of Psalm 23 has become flesh in Jesus Christ, the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. In our post-Easter time we acknowledge that Jesus has laid down his life for us and come again in the resurrected Jesus Christ. In the gospel reading from John, we go back before Jesus death and the authorities were asking Jesus to answer them plainly: “Are you the Messiah?”

Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

In this passage Jesus says to his demanding inquirers that he has already told them plainly what they need to know. The trouble is that the way Jesus has told them is through his works. In other words, it seems that Jesus role and identity cannot be reduced to a title; instead his role and identity must be experienced. This becomes clear in the analogy of the sheep and the shepherd. The sheep know and trust the shepherd, not because they have gone through any sort of rational, intellectual discernment, but because they have experienced the shepherd and his actions. It is the unity of hearing and doing that binds the sheep of Jesus’ fold to him. The unity of relationship.

Here are more words of comfort. *“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.”* This passage does not say my sheep are the ones who believe in me. Some people still find it hard to simply say **“I believe in Jesus Christ.”** Everyone has faith struggles and some questions. I think the important point is that Jesus knows us and believes in us. God takes the initiative with us, a shepherd leading us toward himself, following us in our wanderings, watching over us always.

Have you noticed the image of the *hand*? Imagine being held in Jesus hand, no one will snatch you out of Jesus care and nothing can take you from the loving hand of God. You are always held by that same loving care. This is an amazing image of salvation: being in the protective hands of Christ.

Jesus says the Father and I are one. “The affirmation of oneness between Jesus and the Father is perhaps the core theological claim of the Gospel of John. This oneness determines the character of both the Father and the Son. To see the deeds of the Son and to hear his words is to see and hear the Father.” I am offering you this quote from Lewis Donelson because it affirms the importance of this text. We believe in the Holy Trinity: God, the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit. Three-in-one.

I always find the Book of Revelation complicated but today two comforting phrases stand out for me. One is this image of the Lamb of God. “*The Lamb will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*”

And this blessing:

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever Amen!

So from the 23rd Psalm to the book of Revelation I have emphasized some images of the Good Shepherd. I hope you have heard some words of comfort as well as some ideas to think about. At least you will give the little lambs a second look. God cares and loves all of us.