

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2020
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Acts 2:42-47
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10
Psalm 23

The Good Shepherd, or Politics in Church

A Hollywood funeral starts with an establishing shot of a cemetery. It's probably raining. There's soft, depressing music. And if soldiers aren't solemnly putting a flag over a hero's coffin, there's definitely an older gentleman in priestly garb, and he only has to say one line before his voice goes quiet so we can hear the protagonists talk over him: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." A bit of Psalm 23 is all it takes to let you know you're at a funeral.

Psalm 23, with its promises of long life lived with a good, loving, merciful God who cares for his people as a shepherd for sheep, is among those Psalms suggested and often chosen in our own tradition for funerals. At just six verses, it's probably among the Psalms you can recite by heart.

But it's not only or even primarily a funeral Psalm. The Hebrew doesn't actually point to the afterlife. It says "length of days," not "forever." Moreover, "Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me" pointing toward the future "all the days of my life" is an odd thing to say at the end of someone's earthly life. There's a bit of interpretation there. We sing or say Psalm 23 in thanksgiving for all the blessings of this life and in confidence that all that and more will be enjoyed by the departed in the life to come.

The psalm itself, though, has more to do with this life, with what God does for the author and will continue to do for all who follow the Lord. And what does God do? A clue can be found in the Latin our prayer book retains for the Psalm: "Dominus regit me." *The Lord rules me*. When we recited the Psalm today, we all committed one of the cardinal sins of Episcopal liturgy: we talked politics in church.

Psalm 23 is, among many things, a political hymn about the nature of authority in our lives.

You haven't come to a funeral. You joined a protest.

The Shepherd

Psalm 23 affirms the Lord, by holy name, as shepherd. This is not an idle metaphor about the nature of God. Yes, God is a caring shepherd who does wonderful things, but in affirming who the true shepherd is, the Psalmist is also rejecting false shepherds. Psalm 23 is as defiant and challenging as it is comforting and encouraging.

Shepherds abound in Scripture. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all shepherds. The liberator and lawgiver Moses? Shepherd. The great King David? Shepherd! The prophet Amos? Shepherd! (In Islam, the prophet Muhammad claims that there is no prophet who was not first a shepherd.) Finally, for us Christians, Jesus Christ draws on this pastoral tradition and speaks of himself in

shepherd terms in a discourse from which this Gospel is taken, and from which we read every fourth Sunday of Easter. It's called Good Shepherd Sunday.

After this talk of sheep and shepherds, gates and pastures, thieves and bandits, people are ready to stone Jesus. Why? Why would shepherding be a problem? Why, if this Jesus is such a nice, unobjectionable fellow, just another teacher preaching kindness and love for one another, does he make so many people so angry? What could possibly be wrong with inviting people to take a nap, or count sheep with the shepherd Jesus?

In this case, it's because he commits the Episcopal sin—he brought up politics in church—for shepherds are metaphors for political authorities (see especially Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 34). In Scripture, there are good shepherds and bad shepherds, good and bad rulers—and only one true shepherd, only one true king.

The Egyptian god of the underworld Osiris was depicted with the flail and the crook, both agricultural implements, the flail a symbol of his violent, disciplinary might, the crook a symbol of his benevolence and care. The pharaohs adopted this divine iconography; Tutankhamen is famously depicted holding the flail and crook.

The Psalmist, however, defies this symbolism and the worldly polity for which it stands.

The Psalmist recalls the pharaoh, the great enemy of the Israelites, posing as a shepherd, and confesses instead, "The Lord is my shepherd."

The Psalmist remembers the symbols of the pharaoh, and asserts instead, "Thy rod and thy staff comfort me."

The Psalmist refuses to forget the degradation and impoverishment of the people. The Psalmist looks for and follows instead a God who provides abundance, even in the most threatening of conditions: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

And we who sing this Psalm confess with the Psalmist, "The Lord is our shepherd." Not our president, not our congress, not our justices. Not public officials, however benevolent or expert. Not the military, however heroic. Not billionaires, however philanthropic. Not our preferred parties or policies. Not our favored media. "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation"—nothing, and certainly no virus—governs, guides, and shapes our lives. The Lord is our shepherd.

It is the Lord who brings us comfort. Not our money. Not our possessions. Not our weapons. Not technology. Not position. Not power. Not Hollywood. Not Netflix. Not the Internet. The Lord's rod and staff—God's power and God's grace—comfort us.

The Lord prepares our table as a gift. The table does not come to us by virtue of the market. The table does not come to us by virtue of the government. The table does not even come to us by the many virtues of the Church. The Lord preparest a table before us even in the presence of our enemies.

Indeed, when we say, "The Lord is my shepherd," we sing with this prophetic tradition that the only one who can rightfully compel and guide human action is God. And, with Jesus, we reject as thieves and bandits all those who would pretend to that status. And so it is when Jesus Christ claims to be a shepherd, indeed, the shepherd, when he speaks of himself in these terms, he

assumes an authority his contemporaries and even we are reluctant to acknowledge but in which we find our salvation.

Listening for the Shepherd's Voice

How do we listen for the voice of our shepherd? How do we sing this Psalm anew?

Jesus says, "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." We must listen for our shepherd's voice in our politics, in all our doings—for what is and is not in our shepherd's voice.

As Christians, we reject the violence and cruelties of this earth, the powers and principalities that perpetuate it. We struggle "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Our faces are set with Jeremiah "against the whole earth... against kings... princes, priests, and people." We approach all claims upon the life and freedom given to us in Christ with suspicion or at least a healthy skepticism.

The Lord is our shepherd. And we know the shepherd's voice when we hear it. Our shepherd is good and merciful and graceful and loving, so we must be ready to reject, to correct all that is evil, and cruel, and graceless, and hateful, and indifferent, in others and especially in ourselves.

Because even this healthy rebellion may lead us astray. In rejecting that which is evil, and cruel, and graceless, and hateful, and indifferent, we may soon find ourselves pretending to the very status we would rightfully deny others. In rejecting worldly authority, we might reject authority of any kind. We might protest even that which is in our interest.

Interrogate even your healthy skepticism. Search your conscience. What voices are you listening to? Are they loving voices? Wise voices? Shepherd voices? Where are they leading you? When are you ready to listen to others? Who gets your attention? When should you be ready to listen? When do you lead? And when can you accept guidance, advice, even, dare we say it, rule?

The abundant life to which we are called depends upon your answers.

Follow the example of the good shepherd: "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly." Put others before yourself, careful not to become what you oppose.

Follow the example of the apostles, the good sheep who came before: "Many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." Follow the wonders. Share your blessings. Keep fellowship, and keep praying.

Psalm 23 has been a source of comfort at nearly every funeral I've been to, but I carry this psalm in another march entirely as well. The disciples came to the tomb for a funeral and witnessed a resurrection. We gather together around a Psalm and sing a revolution: "The Lord is our shepherd."