

The Lord is our Shepherd  
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"The Lord is my Shepherd" Pilgrim Church UCC, April 17, 2016, (Psalm) Fourth Sunday of Easter

In Seminary, my preaching professor Mary Luti gave her students all sorts of wisdom. During class we spoke about the greatest commandment Jesus taught—to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Mary emphasized that we have to watch out for the Progressive Christian habit of collapsing the commandment to love God into the commandment to love our neighbors. We may focus almost exclusively on loving our neighbors and tell ourselves that's what it means to love God anyway. Mary reminded us that loving God is distinct and we can't forget this when we have our own pulpits.

She remembered a moment when she herself was sitting in church listening attentively to yet another Progressive Christian sermon on social justice and our moral obligations toward our neighbors. The man sitting next to her in the pew leaned over in her direction and sighed after the sermon. He said to her, "You know, Mary, I think I know by now what God wants me to do. What I'd really like to know is who is the God who wants me to do it?" Mary shared her take with us as she sat with that statement made by a faithful member of that congregation, relating: "This wasn't a question about book-learning or theological concepts. It was a question about intimacy, a question about mystery, a question about prayer, a question ultimately about surrender; it arose straight out of a heart that longed somehow to love as well as to obey." [1]

We know what God wants us to do because Jesus was pretty clear with us during his ministry—love God, love our neighbors, and love ourselves. But do we know the God who wants us to do it? Do we have a relationship with God? Do we really love God with everything we've got?

The Psalmist can help us on our way. Psalm 23 is perhaps the most famous passage in the entire Bible with the prevailing image of God being our Shepherd. Christians have images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. You can often find Jesus depicted in churches walking through a field with a sheep around his shoulders or a lamb in his arms. Though we need to remember that this image begins in the Hebrew scriptures. Now thinking of God as Shepherd was never that appealing to me personally because sheep are known for being kinda dumb. Sheep have such a herd mentality and are known to wander off and get into trouble. Who wants to be called a sheep? But after taking the time to study up on sheep (yes I did!) to contemplate God as our Shepherd, there's actually some redeeming qualities about this whole sheep/shepherd metaphor.

It ends up that sheep are not that dumb. Researchers in the U.K. have discovered that sheep have a good sense of individuality. Sheep can recognize the faces of at least 10 people and 50 other sheep for at least two years! That's better than some of us could probably do, let's be honest. And sheep react to facial expressions—like humans, they prefer a smile to a frown. Though it gets better, sheep even mourn individuals—they know when part of the flock is missing. Honestly these findings from scientists are challenging this stereotype of dumb farmyard animals that have no sense of self. [2] Because sheep rank just below pigs and on par with cattle in intelligence among farm animals.

Sheep have good instincts that have developed over centuries. Sheep are grazers and instinctively run from what scares them. Their only means of survival is to band together in large numbers to protect the flock. Border Collies and other herding dogs are good at their

jobs because sheep see the dogs as predators. So they come together for protection and move away from the danger. If a shepherd can control the dog, the shepherd controls the whole flock.

Sheep follow each other. If you get one to move, they should all come along eventually. Their instinct is to move toward other sheep or even people they perceive as friends. But it's not just some dumb herding mentality, sheep band together for protection and it's a survival instinct. Though sheep also maintain a sense of individuality and prefer some distance or safe zone when it comes to their personal space. It's not as if sheep are one big clump all the time moving around grazing.[3] It ends up that there are some redeeming qualities about sheep which is helpful for us to know as we contemplate God, our Shepherd. Since in this metaphor, we are the sheep!

The Psalmist begins: "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." [4] This is all about the relationship between sheep and shepherd giving us insight into the very nature of God. For a sheep to lie down in green pastures, be led to still waters, and be led on right paths is all about the shepherd taking care of their sheep. This is about having food and water, avoiding danger, and then attaining good shelter. The best translation is that God keeps me alive. The sheep doesn't lack anything because the shepherd is providing the basic necessities for life—food, drink, and shelter/protection. So what we have is someone saying that their life depends solely on God and that God keeps them alive. Though we don't know if this is a firm conviction or more of a plea. As in: God keeps me alive or God (please) keep me alive.

It's fascinating that we often hear the 23rd Psalm at funerals or when someone is dying. That's a perfectly wonderful time to hear these comforting words, particularly "surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." [5] But this Psalm is also about living because it puts daily activities that we all experience—eating, drinking, and seeking shelter and security—into the very arms of God. God cares about the seemingly mundane aspects of our existence. Psalm 23 challenges how we think about how we are living every minute of every hour of every day of every week of every month of every year! Do we give God credit that our lives depend on God and God keeps us alive? [6]

This is so counter-cultural to our consumer-based increasingly secular society. Psalm 23 is radical in declaring that God is a necessity of life. At minimum it forces us to contemplate what we see as necessities because the Psalmist would say—God, food, drink, and shelter/protection. All that other stuff pales in comparison. The Psalmist would ask, what do you need all that extra stuff for if you have God and the basics for survival? J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in *The Hobbit*, "If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world." This is what the 23rd Psalm can help us think about—what matters to us. What's a luxury and what's a necessity? I'm conscious that Lexington is one of the most affluent communities in Massachusetts so these questions (while perhaps uncomfortable) are important to ask here. What does it say about God that according to one of the most famous passages in our Judeo-Christian tradition our Shepherd focuses on the necessities of our lives?

These days it seems like we're encouraged to trust ourselves first, to rely on ourselves. The attitude becomes that we got to where we are today through hard work, sacrifice, and pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. The Christian response might be: and where was God in all of that? Not to discredit how far people come, how hard people work—but do we think that we did all of that alone?

The Psalmist would say nope, not on your life. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside still waters; God restores my soul. God leads me in right paths for God’s name’s sake.”

We know what God wants us to do because Jesus taught that to his followers then and now really well—love God with everything you’ve got, love our neighbors, and love ourselves. Use time, talents, and treasures to make a difference in the world. But do we know the God who wants us to do it? We can see God as our Shepherd who keeps us alive to wonder, alive to hope, alive to compassion, alive to transformation, alive to love.

In the end, we hear that God’s goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. The Hebrew actually means pursue. God pursues us all the days of our lives. Even if we think that we go through this life alone and it’s all up to us—God knows better. God is in active pursuit of us, running after us to keep us alive to love God, others, and ourselves. God seeks for us to focus on the stuff that actually matters. And yes, to reach out in love to our neighbors should they not have the basic necessities of life. Though do we know the God who wants us to do it? Do we know our Shepherd?

“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.”[7] Amen.

[1] Mary Luti, “You Shall Love the Lord Your God...”, <https://sicutlocutusest.com/2016/04/13/you-shall-love-the-lord-your-god/>

[2] Mark Townsend, “Sheep might be dumb. . . but they’re not stupid,” The Guardian, 6 March, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/mar/06/science.animalwelfare>

[3] Richard Cobb, “An Introduction to Sheep Behavior,” Illinois Livestock Trail, University of Illinois Extension, January 22, 1999, <http://livestocktrail.illinois.edu/sheepnet/paperDisplay.cfm?ContentID=1>

[4] Psalm 23:1-3, NRSV.

[5] Psalm 23:6.

[6] J. Clinton McCann, Jr. “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume IV, 767-771.

[7] Psalm 23:4-6.