



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Why the Lord Is My Shepherd

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

May 3, 2009

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year B)

Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18

Nora Tisdale, one of my preaching professors at Princeton Seminary, related something in class one day that has always stuck with me. Her husband, Al, is a Presbyterian pastor who was pastor of Three Chopt Presbyterian Church in Richmond for several years. When Nora accepted the call to teach at Princeton Seminary, Al left Three Chopt for a congregation in New Jersey. On his last Sunday at Three Chopt, Al preached a sermon that he called *Why I Love Jesus*, in which he told very simply and directly why and how he had come to be a disciple of Jesus.

After the service, the recurring theme of those who had filed past their pastor on the way of the sanctuary was this: “Why didn’t you tell us that sooner?” Or, “Why did you wait until your last Sunday with us to share your story of faith?”

So today, on what I hope is *not* my last Sunday as one of your pastor, I want to share a bit about how and why I came to trust that the Lord is my Shepherd. I think it’s an important conversation, because there’s something inside of us—most of us anyway—that wants to be nurtured and cared for. We’re looking for a shepherd to guide us, to help us make decisions, to comfort us when we’re afraid, to protect us from dangers that threaten, to console us when hurt, to provide for us. Oh, I know we don’t put it that directly most of the time, but it’s there—that place deep inside us that longs to be cared for and loved, protected and sustained. And, while the particulars would be different for you, I want to tell you something about how I came to trust that the Lord is my shepherd.

I can still remember how one of my Sunday School teachers sent me one of those little folding, illustrated booklet with the words of the 23rd Psalm. As I remember it, I had been sick and missed Sunday School for a couple of weeks, and she sent it to me. She invited me to try to memorize it and hoped that it would bring me comfort as I worked at getting well.

While I had probably heard that psalm before, there was something about folding and unfolding that booklet, of reading the words and trying to learn them, of knowing that I was missed by a Sunday School teacher, of her prayer that I be comforted that caused me to recognize what countless before and since have come to know about this psalm. There is a power here that’s hard to explain but that grabs you and holds you in such real ways that you can almost feel its grip.

For most of us, from the moment we draw our first breath, we start searching for a shepherd. We look for the one who will feed us and care for us and protect us from danger. And, whether it takes the form of our mother or an adoptive mother or a nurse, we are cradled and held and warmed, and we take in the food that we’re given. And, even though we would have stayed in those arms forever, and the one holding us may have even wanted us to, they had to let us go. We grow up. We begin the process of separation and

maturation.

I was fortunate as a child to have the parents I have. They were the ones who shaped my character and gave direction to my life. I need to point out—especially since they're here today—that the flaws in my character are of my own making. I'm sure some of you at least have my mother say to anyone within earshot when I do something wrong—"He was raised better than that." With patience and consistency, my parents taught me the basics of life. They answered my endless questions with the answers they knew, and they told me when they couldn't answer them. They also told me when they had been wrong and explained how they arrived at a new way of thinking about something. And they taught me the importance of belonging to the church and they each gave countless hours in service to God through the congregation to which we belonged. The church was such an important part of our family's life. But, as important as it was, it was always clear to me that what we did was a joyful response to the overwhelming grace of God—not simply an obligation or something done out of some sense of guilt.

My first shepherds, then, were my parents. But even though they are still significant shapers of my life—and will be as long as I live, even after their deaths—they knew that my life needed something bigger than just them.

So they sent me into the world. I began to look for a shepherd in other places—a teacher at school; a soccer coach; a Sunday School teacher; family friends. I turned to these folks from time to time, learning from them, trusting them, and leaning upon them. I'm thankful that my parents allowed me to form significant relationships with others, even though it meant a lesser role for them. They knew it was part of growing up.

I also came to see my pastor as a shepherd. First, Klahr Raney and then Bob Shelton. Between them, they were my pastors for more than 3 decades. They each gave attention to me as a child and took my questions seriously. and they took my faith seriously and did what they could to support me in a journey that eventually led me into pastoral ministry as well. I still remember conversations with each of them that meant so much to me as a child learning what it means to belong to God.

From this widening circle of shepherds I learned something that has meant more to me than anything else. I learned that I belong to God. And that whatever I do in life—whether I succeed or fail—nothing will ever change God's love for me.

It finally dawned on me that one of the main reasons that I believe that the Lord is my shepherd is because my parents believe it for their own lives. And they told me about it enough to make me consider the question myself.

If you asked me what caused my love of God, I'm not sure I could distinguish the answer. It was, to be sure, because of what I came to understand of God in my own life. But wrapped up with that was the love and respect I have for my parents and others who shaped my life. In other words, if they had staked their lives on loving God, it was worth considering doing the same in my own life. I will be forever thankful for those who shared that part of their life with me, even as a child.

I'm thinking now of some of my favorite words from one of our hymns:

*Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things hath done, in whom his world rejoices;*

who, from our mother our mother's arms, hath blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today."

I'm thankful that my parents noticed the "countless gifts of love" given from God's hand and taught us to be thankful for them in our own lives. And I'm especially thankful that my parents (and that Sunday School teacher) helped to teach me the words of the 23rd Psalm. They are some of the first words of scripture that I took into my heart, and I'm often surprised when they well up from within me during some difficult time when I sense the Shepherd's care.

There's a state park in Tennessee called Fall Creek Falls built around a large waterfall that you can view from two places. You can look at it from an observation deck at the top of the trail, or you can wind your way down the steep and crooked trail to the bottom of the falls.

One day I traveled to Fall Creek Falls when I was struggling with some grief and I hiked down to the base of the falls. I scrambled across the huge rocks that formed at the bottom, and inched over to let the cascading water splash over me. It was as if the force of that water was literally soaking into me, and I remember walking back up the trail with a bit more life in my step. I hadn't exactly expected it, but the power of those waters swept over me and into me in a way that gave me hope.

That's sort of how I understand this 23rd Psalm. There have been countless times when I have felt the power of this psalm flood over me and into me. Standing by the grave of a friend and overcome with grief, the words have borne me up. In a darkened sanctuary after learning of the death of six youth on the way home from church camp, the words steadied my reeling soul. Time after time, the words of this psalm have leaped from the recesses of who I am to sound again for me the amazing hope that I belong to God who walks with me and feeds me and gives me rest.

There's a novel by Sue Monk Kidd called *The Secret Life of Bees*. Perhaps you read it or saw the recent movie based on it. The novel tells the story of a 14-year-old girl named Lily who is raised by her abusive father because her mother has died. When she gets a moment to herself, Lily would look at the one picture of her mother that she had. That picture had the name of a South Carolina town written on the back, and Lily runs there when she finally decides to leave home. She's not certain what she's looking for, but she knows she has to get away from where she was.

Lily ends up staying at the home of a group of black sisters who keep bees. One of the strange things in this house was a wooden statue of the Black Madonna which sat in the corner of the main room. Over the years, the family and some of their friends had developed a sort of pseudo-religion involving this statue. They even named the honey they sold "Black Madonna Honey."

When Lily asked how this tradition came to be, here's what August—the oldest black sister—had to say: "When I was younger than you, all of us would visit our grandmother for the whole summer. We'd sit on the rug in the parlor, and Big Mama—that's what we called her—would tell us the story. Every time, when she finished, May would say, "Big Mama, tell it again," and off she'd go, repeating the whole thing. I swear, if you

listen to my chest with a stethoscope, what you'd hear is that story going on and on in Big Mama's voice."

Do you have a story like that inside of you? Is there someone who would hear a story in your voice if we placed a stethoscope to their chest?

You are here in church today because someone along the way took the time to nurture you in the faith. My hope for this sermon is that you will remember them with joy.

But I also hope for something more—that you will not be afraid to share your own trust in God as your shepherd with those who are even now searching for a shepherd of their own. It could be that someone's love for you may cause them to consider God's love for them in a way that they never have before. Invite them to come with you to church on Bring a Friend Sunday—or any other Sunday—because your love for them may be just the thing God will use to make them aware of God's love for them, leading them into the discovery of the shepherd they don't have to go searching for, but who pursues them all the days of their lives:

*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.*