

John 10: 1-10

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. You know the image: Jesus sitting under a tree, with a cute little lamb on his lap. Or maybe the one with Jesus standing with the lamb across his shoulders. It's a beautiful image. It's a *safe* image. But it's a little incomplete.

Here Jesus was not talking to his followers but rather the Pharisees. They were accusing him of being from Satan because he healed a blind man on the Sabbath. His response was that he was the Good Shepherd, not like the hired hands who collected their pay for watching the sheep, but would abandon them at the first sight of trouble.

Now for thousands of years, the Jewish people had used the Good Shepherd image for God. It goes all the way back to Genesis, which says that Joseph was saved "By the power of the mighty one of Jacob, by the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, the God of your father ..." Such imagery was used by Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Zechariah, and by David, a shepherd himself and seen in the Psalms attributed to him.

So the Pharisees knew *exactly* what Jesus was getting at — he was claiming to be God. They also knew he was contrasting himself to them — the hired hands entrusted to care for God's people, but were really only concerned with themselves.

The Pharisees came under a lot of criticism by Jesus. It wasn't that they were bad people, most were probably good. But they had gotten legalistic, They lost sight of the spirit of Judaism. I've been told that can even happen in some Christian churches...where rules come before people.

In John's Gospel, Chapter 10 the metaphor of the shepherd is illustrated in how the shepherd cares for his flock, protecting them from weather, thieves, and wolves. He loves and shields them and if necessary, he would lay down his life for them.

We see such a lifestyle in the Palestinian shepherd who would have shared in all the hardships and dangers of the flock. Theirs was a way of life that left them on the margins of society and unclean when it came to their religious observances.

The reality is far removed from the cuddly shepherds that we see in our Nativities.

And so it was with Jesus. Jesus lived a counter cultural lifestyle which took him away from security, daring to express by words and actions the grace of God for all peoples. And rather than exalting those in power and leadership, he was often with the marginalized...telling them that they also were a part of the Kingdom of God. And through it all, he attracted the ire of the political and religious leaders of his day...leading to his public execution. All for us...His flock.

Two men were called on, in a large classroom, to recite the Twenty-third Psalm. One was a trained orator well versed in speech, technique and drama. He spoke Psalm in a very powerful way. When he finished, the audience erupted in applause. Then another man, who was much older, repeated the same words - But when he finished, no sound came from the class. Instead, people sat in deep stillness and contemplation. "Then the orator, stood up and said. 'I have a confession to make, 'The difference between what you have just heard from my old friend, and what you heard from me is this: I know the Psalm, but my friend knows the Shepherd.

David was also a shepherd... tending his father's sheep when God sent Samuel to anoint him as King over all of Israel.

Now to be a good shepherd it took a person with a very special heart. His heart had to be tough and disciplined, but also had to be open & compassionate.

A shepherd's life required them to spend a lot of time alone in the wilderness. With no one to talk to, the shepherd had a lot of time to think and draw closer to God.

Obviously David spent his time doing just that. Every verse of Psalm 23 testifies of a truth about God and the relationship David had with Him. David paints with words, a picture of God, as the Great Shepherd of his

life. What David was to his sheep, he considered the Lord to be that and even more so to himself.

Now the 23rd psalm is the most beloved of the Psalms. It's a shame that we tend to only hear sermons about it at funerals. It is a shame because Psalm 23 is *a psalm for the living*--it is a psalm to apply to our everyday lives.

Notice how David changes the tense of the psalm in verse 4? In the first three verses, David refers to God as "**He**". Then in verses 4 and 5, David switches and refers to God as "**You**".

See one cannot talk for very long *about* God... without actually talking *to* God.

Look at the very first line alone, "**The Lord is my shepherd**", a phrase so familiar that we probably are missing the magnitude here. David is saying that the eternal God of the Universe is his personal shepherd.

"The Lord is MY shepherd".

This is a reminder to us that *Christianity is not so much a religion as it is a relationship*. Being a Christian means having a relationship with the living God.

And then you hear about the green pastures, and you might think they are blessings but they are not. The green pastures eventually give way to "**walking through the valley of the shadow of death**". The constant in this psalm is not the green pastures - they are temporary. The constant in this psalm is not the valley of the shadow of death either - David says we eventually walk "**through**" it. The only constant in Psalm 23 is the presence of God with us in both circumstances.

The blessing of the Shepherd is not an elimination of our problems. The 23rd Psalm portrays life as a journey - as a pilgrimage with God - to God...ending in...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!

Now how can we apply some of this wisdom practically in our day-to-day lives? That's also contained within the Psalm! Lets' just take verse 2 and 3 for instance.

TAKE THE JAR OF WATER!

God leads me besides still water...the Hebrew words here meant peaceful, harmonious, still, deep water...and here God revives my soul!

Take a look at this water...look at when I shake it and when it is calm and still...how would you describe the state of your soul today...this kind of water or this...some of us may probably need lots of containers....

God takes this and makes it like this. He connects this water to our soul...to a Palestinian shepherd still water would be very rare indeed. In Israel you get either quickly evaporating water or flash floods! And the nomadic shepherd would know exactly where the still water would be.

God wants to take this kind of water and restore it to this...could some of you use some of this right now...could our world need some calm still peaceful water today?

I don't think anybody would argue with me when I say that we have a problem with soul depletion. There's too much going on!!! Not enough time to be still...

And here in Psalm 23, we are told that the Lord wants to revive our soul. Maybe you're here today and you feel a spiritual dryness. And you can't really explain it...well what you are dealing with is this NEED to have your soul revived/refreshed!

So where can I get me some of that?!

First let's talk about that word that is translated "revive". The word literally means replenishes. To return to its original state. Like when you refill your tank with gasoline. He keeps me going. He refills my tank with vitality, energy and enthusiasm for living...He revives my soul!

Soul...

That's a very important word in the Bible, 755 times in the Old Testament the Hebrew word Nephesh is translated as soul, heart, life, or mind. And all the time it's

that same word “nephesh” ...and it literally means to BREATHE.

Nephesh, the ability to bring in and breathe out air. God restores my soul, God refreshes my life. God resets me! God returns me to my breathing!!!

So are we talking about a spiritual mystery or our actual breathing and for many people these are different things especially to us here in the west - but for the ancient Hebrew's there was no such distinction. They were the same thing!

A person **IS** an integrated being...in today's world we tend to separate these things out. We ask: how's your spiritual life going...and how is this different from your job, your families, cheeseburgers and everything else?

If these are all in separate compartments...these categories are unfamiliar to the scriptures...See there is NO Hebrew word for spiritual...because that would mean that other things aren't spiritual... for the psalmist, all of life is an integrated reality...everything is spiritual...God gives life to all of it and all of me!

There are very practical implications here! As holistic beings...just begin by breathing - Nephesh!!! ...and breath slowly and deeply from your abdomen (not your chest)...

Now we American's breathe on average 16 to 20 breathes per minute, yet we are optimally built to breath only 6 times per minute. Our bodies are deigned to gain 80-90% of its energy through breathing. Yet our current breathing habits only account for us accessing 10-20% of this energy!

So to what degree does the stillness of our soul connect to something as simple as breathing...what do all religious traditions begin with...breathing, prayer, meditation...what is the human reset button...breathing! It's how we were created and designed to function.

By breathing correctly your entire body and mind become still, to include your heartbeat (which actually mirrors your breathes rhythm).

When you find yourself with disruptive waters can you still the water if your body is out of whack? For many of us we don't equate our physical well-being with the state of our heart and soul...again we separate these things out.

So when we eat the wrong foods and don't get enough fresh air and water, and when we don't exercise or get enough sleep...sitting alone with our bibles and believing everything will be alright denies how we were created to be.

So how does God revive and restore your soul? Simply start by breathing. When people are in medical crisis, first responders will first tell the patient to breath...ask someone giving birth how important breathing is...

See once you begin to breathe, you become still, and in a still state you can begin to separate yourself from your circumstances... and you can actually observe yourself (detachment). After you get good at it, you soon realize that the person doing the observing is the real you and that the circumstances you are witnessing, the turbulent water, is just passing by.

When your stressing, anxious ... it feels like YOU...it's like you are in the jar and your shaking as well...you become your anger, you become your stress...it consumes you! Now what the Psalmist is saying is that you will have green pastures, but you will also walk through shadows...

God doesn't promise sunshine all the time, what he promises is His presence with you...so when you are feeling caught up in your own turbulence... you must detach yourself from it...stand apart from it...observe it for what it is...a passing thing...see and know that, THAT is not you, just something you are experiencing... that is how God sees us...for who we truly are...not by our circumstances or what we are experiencing at any given moment...

Eventually we come to KNOW the truth – that at some level, all these experiences are temporary and passing in a way that YOU are not...in reality something about the water is changing... but something about YOU goes on.

Now how did the early Christians talk about this idea...they would say I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but that Christ lives in me. You see, there

is a grounded centered reality you find in Christ, that transcends the part of you that gets offended, bothered, and perturbed. There is a part of you that is connected to God...your true self... and it is unshakeable!

So folks can say what they want, throw stones, troll you on social media...and you will simply observe it and acknowledge it. But that stuff is not you, it does not own you, because YOU belong to the shepherd and you will come through whatever it is.

You are extracting the emotion, the tension, the drama of it, and you are placing it in its proper context... you are being reminded of who you are, the true you, the enduring you, the you that lives on in Christ.

The mystics, saints, desert fathers and mothers through contemplative prayer taught themselves this discipline of reminding themselves that this thing (shake the water)...I can give it what it needs, I can pay attention to it, I can work to resolve it, but I am not confused as to whether this thing is me. I have a deeper reality that goes on!

By simply breathing and through detached observing you can radically transform the state of your life.

We often become seduced (sometimes even by religion) that tells us...Oh you have some turbulent waters...here's step one, step two...you need this pill...you need to purchase this... and what that tells you is that what you desperately need is somewhere else. But what David says is that the Good Shepherd revives my soul. That everything I need is right here.

We have frustrations, anxiety, fear, busy- busy- busy...and Jesus invites us into that stillness...that peace which the world cannot give us. Invite God in to revive your soul! Breath... Observe... trust that our Good Shepherd is right there with us...

“The Lord is MY shepherd.” To utter these words is to trust that within and beyond our sometimes-scary world, there exists a loving, benevolent presence—someone who cares deeply about us. Psalms 23 is deeply personal. It is about an individual's relationship with God:

“The Lord is *MY* shepherd”

When we recite this psalm in times of trouble or uncertainty, we invoke within ourselves TRUST in this GOOD Shepherd. God does not promise us an easy ride, a safe passage, or a trouble-free life... But what He does promise: is to be with us...the Great Shepherd of our souls.

So may God revive your soul!

And may you all come to know that Jesus truly is YOUR Good Shepherd.

....AMEN!

Your faithful servant,

carmen