

"I Am the Good Shepherd"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

March 22, 2009

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Psalm 23 (NRSV)

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely 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.

Jesus: The Great I AM
a Lenten series

This is the fourth Bible study
in a seven-week Lenten
series.

In John's Gospel, Jesus
makes seven dramatic
statements about himself
that begin "I am . . ." These
include "I am the bread of
life" and "I am the way, the
truth, and the life." In this
seven-week series, we are
exploring each of the seven
statements, seeking a
deeper understanding of
what they reveal to us about
Jesus and the vocation that
will take him to a cross in
Jerusalem and then on to his
resurrection and exaltation.

The Weekly Bible Studies can
be downloaded at
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John 10:11-18 (NRSV)

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Jesus is not only the gate for the sheep, the only way to safety, he is the worthy shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep, the sheep whom he knows intimately and have been given to him by the Father.

Jesus' simple statement, "I am the good shepherd," poses a problem for us. We think we "get it," that we have here just a plain-spoken statement of comfort and guidance. Very soft and warm – cute lambs leaping here and there, led by a kindly shepherd who gently cares for them, even carrying the lambs on his shoulders if need be. Very pastoral – and very shallow! As with all the "I am . . ." statements of Jesus, there is much more lying right below the surface.

One way to get deeper into any Bible passage is to read it carefully. This process of careful reading is called "exegesis," from the Greek word for "leading out." We strive to begin with the text and let it lead us to its meaning, rather than our reading meaning into the text.

Michael Gorman suggests that we think of exegesis as *investigation, conversation, and art*. Exegesis is the careful investigation of the many dimensions of the text, its historical/geographical/cultural setting, context, grammar, vocabulary, and so on. Exegesis is also a conversation with other readers of the text, including those who have come before us. They too have sought to discern the meaning of the text. Finally, good exegesis is an art, needing imagination, sensitivity, and intuition.¹ So let's take a closer

The Psalm of Comfort

In his commentary on Psalm 23,¹ James May helps us to grasp why this particular psalm has so much meaning for so many people. It is a psalm of comfort for *each* of us before it is one for all of us.

"Although the use of shepherd as an image of God as sovereign over the people was well established in Israel, its use in a first person singular confession is unparalleled. It is the focus of the shepherd's care on one person that gives the psalm such intimate force. The individual dimension of trust and the experience of grace are lifted up. Perhaps in an indirect way the psalm prepares for the story of the shepherd who does leave the flock to go on a search for one lost sheep (Luke 15:4).

The earliest Christians said, 'The Lord is my shepherd' and understood Lord to be also the title of Jesus. In John 10:11, Jesus says directly, 'I am the good shepherd.' They found him to be 'shepherd and guardian' of their souls (I Peter 2:25; 5:4). In the Christian rereading of the psalm, Jesus, as the shepherd in David's place, is the one who restores our souls, leads us in the paths of righteousness, accompanies us through danger, spreads the holy supper before us in the presence of sin and death, and pursues us in his gracious love all the days of our lives.

Psalm 23 has had a regular place in the liturgy of funeral services. That is a proper setting for its use. It gives the congregation poignant words of trust to say in the face of the enemy who is not yet destroyed (I Cor. 15:26). The recitation of the psalm prepares for the eschatological picture in which it is echoed, the picture of the Lamb who has become king and shepherd and guides the redeemed to living water. Here the absolute sense of 'I do not lack' is completely fulfilled (Rev. 7:15-17)."

¹Mays, J. L. (1994). *Psalms*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (1.19). Louisville: John Knox Press.

look at today's passage from John -- a little exegesis.

A closer look

First, we have to set aside some of what we think we know about shepherds. Then, as now, those who personally herd sheep have to be strong and tough, working hard in often difficult conditions to guide and protect their herds. On occasions, the shepherds have to confront a wild animal that threatens the sheep. Some even die in the line of duty.

Next, Don Carson² notes that even the adjective "good" can get us off track. It is the typical translation of the Greek, *kalos*, which "suggests perhaps nobility or worth: the noble shepherd or the worthy shepherd." Jesus is contrasting himself to hired hands who have no real attachment to their sheep, who are unworthy shepherds – unworthy of the responsibility given them.

Jesus is the "good shepherd" who "lays down his life for his life." The worthy shepherds of the ancient near east may have sometimes been killed in the line of duty, but none of them intended to die. But, Carson suggests, Jesus' strong language here is not merely about Jesus' willingness to die for his sheep, but about his intention to do so, in line with the Father's will (v. 17-18).

Even the preposition in v. 11, "*for* the sheep," conveys this self-sacrificing act. In John's gospel, the Greek preposition always occurs in a sacrificial context. In his analysis of this passage, Carson notes that:

"In no case does this suggest a death with merely exemplary significance; the shepherd does not die as an example for his sheep,

¹Michael Gorman's book, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A basic guide for students and ministers* is an excellent lay-suitable introduction to sound biblical exegesis.

²From Carson's excellent commentary on John's gospel in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series, Eerdmann's Publishing, 1991. The extended quote that begins on this page is from p. 386 of the commentary.

throwing himself off a cliff in a grotesque and futile display while bellowing, 'See how much I love you!' No, the assumption is that the sheep are in mortal danger; that in their defense the shepherd loses his life; that by his death they are saved. That, and that alone, is what makes him *the good shepherd*."

The Psalm of Intimacy

Here is a second perspective on the lasting appeal of Psalm 23. This is from P.C. Craigie's commentary on the Psalms:¹

"There are few psalms in the Psalter which are so well-loved and well-known as Ps 23. Its appeal lies partly in the simplicity and beauty of its poetry, strengthened by the serene confidence which it exudes. But more than that, the genius of the psalmist is to be found in his extraordinary expression of a trusting relationship with God. To express such a relationship in simple language is no easy task; on the one hand, the psalm could sink to a monotonous repetition of affirmations, while on the other hand it could defy the abilities of language for articulate expression as a consequence of its profundity. The psalmist has avoided the extremes and found a middle path which is at once simple, yet also profound. The simplicity arises from the use of the shepherd metaphor, involving language which would be understood readily by all living in a world where the landscape was dotted with sheep and shepherds. The profundity emerges in the beauty of the poetry, which transforms simple metaphor into profoundly spiritual expression. And the appeal of the psalm has continued through subsequent generations, partly because the beauty of the poetry has survived the process of translation, and partly because (until very recently) the pastoral metaphor has retained its significance and accessibility to the majority of human beings. The psalm is written consistently from the perspective of the sheep; that is, its expression of trust and confidence presupposes an awareness of helplessness and need on the part of the one who trusts. In a distinctive fashion, the psalmist has set forth the fundamentals of the covenant relationship, not in terms of Lord and servant, but in the more intimate language of shepherd and sheep."

¹Craigie, P. C. (2002). *Vol. 19: Word Biblical Commentary : Psalms 1-50*. Word Biblical Commentary (208). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

How intimate is the relationship between Jesus, the good shepherd, and his sheep? It is the intimacy shared by Jesus and his Father! (v. 15). There are even sheep that do not belong to Jesus, whom he "must" bring also, presumably a reference to Gentiles.³

Stepping back

There is a larger context at work in all of seven of Jesus' "I am . . ." statements. As we saw last week, the most important background is Ezekiel 34 and the "shepherds of Israel," in which God promises to raise up a good shepherd from the house of David. Clearly, in today's passage, Jesus claims to be the fulfillment of that promise. But there is more.

God as the Good Shepherd is one of the dominant portraits of God in the Scriptures, cutting across both the Old and New Testaments. Psalm 23 is certainly the most well-known, but, like Ezekiel, the prophets Jeremiah and Micah also make use of the good shepherd imagery (Jer. 23:1-3, Micah 5:2,4). There are numerous times that the biblical writers refer to God's people as the sheep who need a shepherd.

These images of shepherd and sheep help us to grasp that Jesus' statement, "I am the good shepherd," is more than a statement about his identity. It focuses us on the relationship between Jesus and his followers, those who have placed their faith in this shepherd. We have heard his voice and we follow him. As the writer of Hebrews put it, Jesus is "the great shepherd of the sheep" (13:20).

As Gail O'Day reminds us in her commentary on John, the images that Jesus gives us are intensely relational; they have no meaning without the sheep. Each of us is among those for whom Jesus is willing to die. Who we are cannot be separated from who Jesus is. May we hear evermore clearly our shepherd's voice.

³When you come to gospels, bear in mind that Jesus, all the disciples, and nearly everyone he teaches or encounters is Jewish. It probably surprised many of them to hear Jesus talk about a herd that includes more than the Jews.

The Poems called the Psalms

Knowing how poetry is put together can help us surmount some of the barriers to understanding and appreciation. This is no less true for Hebrew poetry than it is for contemporary poetry. However, Hebrew poetry is not put together the way English poetry is put together. For example, I like poems that rhyme – but this is not how Hebrew poetry was written. There are two principal characteristics of Hebrew poetry: rhythm of thought and rhythm of sound.

Rhythm of thought is the balancing of ideas in some structured form. Here are a few examples:

- Using synonyms
Psalm 24:2
for he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the waters.
- Using metaphors
Psalm 18:31
For who is God besides the Lord?
And who is the Rock except our God?
- Using word order
Psalm 1:2
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
- Using parallel parts of speech
Psalm 19:7-8
The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making the wise simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

There are many more examples of techniques that the Hebrew poets used to create a rhythm in the expression of their thoughts. We need to keep this in mind when we are reading the poems. Look for the big point; listen for what it says to your heart. The psalms resist a detailed analysis of each word and phrase.

The poets also used a variety of techniques to create a *rhythm of sound* in the poem. Some of the psalms are acrostics, in which the first letters of succeeding lines or stanzas spell out the alphabet, a word, or a phrase. Sometimes the poets used alliteration, in which each word begins with the same consonant. The poets also used a lot of word plays. Unfortunately, nearly all of this is lost when the Hebrew is translated into another language. Many commentaries on the Psalms can help you see the poet's art.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Who wants to be your good shepherd? There are always lots of folks lobbying for the job. Who tells you that they want to protect and provide for you? To show you the way to the life you've always wanted? You might share some stories of times in your life when a seeming "good shepherd" let you down, when you discovered that the shepherd wasn't as good as you thought or as able.
2. In what ways do these false shepherds (wolves dressed in shepherd's clothing?) fail us? Why do we find it so easy to invest our trust and our hopes somewhere other than in God? I'm reminded of the time the Israelites demanded a human king, just like all the peoples around them. The prophet Samuel reminded them that God was to be their king, but the Israelites would not relent. Samuel warned them that they better be careful what they wished for, as kings are inclined to thievery, mischief, and worse. But the people wanted a king (a good shepherd!) and so God gave them one. Of course, the shepherds of Israel turned out to be wolves themselves (Ezekiel 34).
3. The 23rd Psalm is so familiar to us it can be hard for us to read it with fresh hearts. You might try gathering five or six different translations of the psalms (many are available on-line), including Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase. Read through each translation slowly and aloud, breathing slowly, meditatively. Then come back to the translation that most touched your heart. Has the reading and speaking brought you comfort? Peace? Did you hear the psalm in new ways? How can this brief psalm help us to place our heart where it belongs and where it wants to be?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In 2007, the Lenten sermon series was drawn from John's Gospel. We read through the Gospel that year and the daily readings for this Lent will again take us through the entire Gospel.

<p>Monday, John 8:21-30 What does Jesus mean by “the Son of Man must be lifted up”? Compare this to 3:13-14. Are there people who believe in Jesus as a result of what he says and does or is he rejected by all?</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 8:31-59 What does Jesus mean when he says that the Jews are not Abraham's children if they reject him? What is the significance of Jesus' statement, “Before Abraham was, I am” (8:58).</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 9:1-12 Jesus heals a blind man. What do you think Jesus means by, “he [the man] was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him”?</p>	<p>Thursday, John 9:13-34 The Pharisees investigate the healing. Why? What do you think of this trial? What is the healed man's response to his interrogators? Why do you think the Pharisees refuse to believe?</p>
<p>Friday, John 9:35-41 The story of this blind man is one of fearless faith. He doesn't understand everything, but who does. The man clings to what he knows is true and embraces Jesus as Lord. Is this story about physical blindness or spiritual blindness?</p>	<p>Saturday, John 10:1-19 Jesus takes upon himself the image of God as the Good Shepherd. Why do those who oppose him (“the Jews”) think he must be possessed by a demon?</p>

