

Wesley United Methodist Church
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
Looking for Love – Look for the Shepherd
Text: I Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
John 9:1-39

The image of Jesus as a Shepherd, or the image of God as shepherd is found frequently in Scripture and it certainly meant something to the people of Jesus' culture but it is likely to mean far less to us today. I think that using this image was one more example of Jesus or people using everyday common images to help explain or illustrate much more complicated concepts.

During Lent, we have been focusing on how we look for love in our lives; how and where we look for meaning and purpose. We have looked for the helper, our keeper, and with Nicodemus realized that love is not about what we deserve, but about what God has done for us; that God is always present and always urging us to choose love. Last week we looked for the one who satisfies our deepest thirst; with the Samaritan woman at the well realizing that Jesus offers us life-giving water and satisfies our deepest thirst – not just for a day or a period of time but always.

So, we know that God loves us just because, and although we may do many things out of response to God's love – there is nothing we can do to deserve God's love or to increase God's love for us. We can be satisfied at the deepest level only by God. St. Augustine, one of the ancient church fathers, speaking of God, wrote, "Our heart is restless until it rests in you." We are always thirsty until we fill ourselves with God.

So, if we accept God's love, and fill ourselves with God, what else do we need? For many of us, there is a tendency to look for security or love

in powerful figures – people who promise to “fix” things for us. President Trump ran on a platform of “fixing” things and “making America great again.” A large number of people believed that he had the power to fix what they thought was wrong with our country. We are no different than the people in the Bible who were looking for Kings, Saviors, Liberators, Messiah, someone to fix things, to protect them, to give them freedom from oppression.

After they had begged for a king, God gave them Saul as their first king. They quickly learned that too much power for one person is not necessarily a good thing for everyone else. In the reading, today from 1 Samuel, Samuel is sent by God to find the next king. We heard about how Jesse’s sons were paraded in front of Samuel for selection. Samuel was sure that the first son was the right one, but soon learned that this was not the one God had chosen. After seven sons had passed by, they had still not seen the one God had chosen to be king.

Jesse had not even thought to bring his youngest son, David. David was the youngest, and he was out in the fields taking care of the sheep. It was hard to believe but this young man who had no readily observable skills, other than taking care of sheep, was the one who would become king. David became a legendary king and is credited with writing many of the psalms in our Bible, including the very popular 23rd psalm that we read.

The 23rd psalm is still read at most funerals and people of a certain age may remember memorizing it. It was, and is, a psalm of comfort and encouragement for Christians and for Jews throughout the centuries.

This psalm demonstrates for us why we look for a shepherd, why Jesus is considered the “good shepherd”, and why the image of shepherd was used frequently throughout the Old Testament to describe God.

A shepherd did not take care of sheep from afar. Shepherds were up close and personal with their sheep. After Easter, we will hear again about Jesus as shepherd and Jesus statement that the sheep know the voice of the Shepherd and that the Shepherd calls the sheep by name. This does not sound like someone who is far removed from those for whom he is caring.

The Shepherd had great responsibility for taking care of the sheep. Wild animals might attack and it was the shepherd's responsibility to drive them off. It was the shepherd's responsibility to make sure that the sheep had plenty of grass to eat and water to drink. Sheep are creatures of habit and they will typically not wander off looking for grass. They will stay in the same place, eating until all the grass is gone and will eventually starve unless the shepherd has scouted out other places to graze and leads them there.

When they come to the water, they will likewise, gather in one place until they make the water so muddy that it is not healthy to drink. It is the shepherd's responsibility to find them sources of good water to drink. Sheep will typically follow the shepherd, he does not drive from behind, but leads from in front. God does not drive us, but rather leads us if we will follow.

The Psalmist says, "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want." The Shepherd takes care of the needs of the sheep. "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters." The Shepherd makes sure that the sheep don't stay in the overgrazed area and the muddy water, but is always looking for and leading them to a richer deeper experience. This image suggests to me that God our Shepherd wants us to have not just the basic necessities to live, but also an abundant life; a life filled not

only with necessities but also a life filled with meaning, with purpose, with hope, encouragement.

“He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” God cares about more than just what we need to physically survive. God cares about the inner person.

We are about half way through Lent and at the end, we will be greeted by resurrection – new life. Caring for our souls is God’s concern. Here’s where that whole question of purpose and meaning comes in again. Living is about more than just surviving – it is about finding meaning in life. Life is about pursuing a relationship with God and that is a journey – sometimes a calm journey, but often a wild journey filled with unexpected twists and turns.

The next verse, however, is the one that catches me every time. For me, it is the central part of our journey of faith. We may have many friends or companions on our life journey and some of them will stay with us when life gets tough. However, being human, we are usually quite uncomfortable with the most difficult times in the lives of our friends and we often try to lift their spirits or to somehow fix things so that they will feel better. We try to take away the darkness and the pain, but on some level, that often has the opposite effect. When we try to help others in that way, or they try to help us, denying the pain, or trying to make it go away, or somehow fix things it often gives more power to the darkness and the pain. It may cause us to think that our friends don’t really understand. I often hear from people, that they don’t want others to know what is going on in their lives because they don’t want to bother others. That may leave us feeling more alone.

That’s where the words of the psalmist offer hope and testimony about what God does during that time. “Even though I walk through the

darkest valley” or in the King James Version, “The valley of the shadow of death.” “I fear no evil for you are with me.” God, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, takes a different approach. God walks with us right in the middle of our troubles. God walks with us into the darkest places of our lives and never leaves us to face them alone.

It doesn’t change the darkness. It doesn’t take away the pain, but it can make it easier to bear knowing that we are not alone. When my children were little, a kiss and a band-aid often helped the hurt go away sooner or at least make it easier, but then again, I did have magic band-aids. There aren’t any magic band-aids for the really tough things in our lives.

God doesn’t take those away. Knowing God is with us, doesn’t mean that the person we loved comes back to life, or that the Doctor didn’t use the “C” word, or that our boss calls to hire us back. Knowing God is with us, doesn’t stop those things from happening in the first place. Our life journey, and our faith journey will include places we would rather not go. It will include things we don’t want to have happen, but they will anyway. God doesn’t promise us a life free of pain or sorrow. As the song says, “I never promised you a rose garden.” God’s doesn’t promise us a rose garden, but God does promise to be with us when we walk through that darkest valley – the valley of the shadow of death. As we look ahead to Easter, we remember that it is a valley of the shadow of death – that death doesn’t win. Death doesn’t get the final word. God does.

The rod and the staff were the tools that the shepherd used to protect the sheep. A sheep or lamb that had gotten too close to a cliff, might get hooked by the staff and pulled back. A rod might be used to beat away a wild animal that was threatening the sheep. God will use whatever tools

God has to protect us in the ways that matter most – even in the darkest valley.

We live in a culture where more and more we communicate in short spurts. As I was writing this, I was also participating in a text message exchange with family members. We find that we are often so busy that we grab food on the run. We eat separately from those we love. We often don't have the time for long leisurely phone calls or visits in the living room or kitchen. We find that we have to get to the point quickly. We may find misunderstandings taking place more often because we don't always take the time to really listen and to check out what the other person is saying.

It seems that the ability to really listen is being corroded. We often desire to jump in and somehow make things better. Several years ago, I found myself in a very unusual situation. The person I was with wanted to talk and share some difficult things. She made me agree that I would not interrupt her, that I would not say a word. For about two hours, she talked and I listened. I could not use words to respond to anything she said. I found myself paying more attention to visual signals – smiling, nodding, shaking my head, closing my eyes, whatever seemed appropriate at the time. For much of the time she was walking around the room and was behind me so that I couldn't see her and she couldn't see my nonverbal responses. Today, I do not remember a word of what she said. It was a story she needed to tell and had never been able to tell before. It was her story not mine and she didn't need anything from me except to really listen and to create a safe space for her to share.

I think I will always remember that experience. I had always thought I was pretty good at listening to someone, but that day stretched me in ways I couldn't have imagined. I believe that is what God does with us – God

listens and truly hears everything we say, and everything we do not say. It may be that the experience of feeling that we have really been heard, if we can receive that presence from God, may then be something we can also learn how to offer it to others; to be really present in the darkest valleys and not try to fix anything. We may learn how to walk through the darkest valleys with those who need us to be there. We may be the hands and feet of Christ as we embody God's love to another.

The shepherd here, seems to become the host. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." In the middle East, even a stranger would be offered hospitality and a meal in this hot desert area. So, even when we are rejected, even when we are among our enemies, the psalmist says that God has continued to meet his needs and more. God has anointed his head with oil – a sign of abundance, a sign of love, a sign of protection and care.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." That sounds good but we all know that goodness and mercy do not always seem to be with us. The Hebrew word used here for "follow" can also mean "to pursue", and that changes things. God's goodness and mercy chase after us, even if we run in the other direction. We can never outrun God's love for us.

"I shall dwell in the house of the Lord, forever." "Psalm 23 is about finding life in its truest sense, which is union with the Lord and discovering that it can bring healing to our lives. We see the darkness around us lose its power in the midst of the Lord's presence and we are restored."ⁱ

Like the man in the Gospel, the man born blind, who comes quite literally to see Jesus and to understand who he is, we, too, are invited repeatedly to the relationship with Jesus where he is our shepherd, the one

we can trust to walk with us, the one we can trust to help us see the truth and the light even in the darkest places; the one who protects, loves us and who shepherds us leading us in the right paths. Jesus is the one who walks with us in the darkest valleys and offers us an abundance of life that we can only begin to imagine.

Through it all, we have the Savior as our guide, as our shepherd, through the light and the dark, through the scary and dangerous valleys as well as through the green pastures and beside the still waters.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word, The articles on Psalm 23 provided much support and direction of this sermon.