

Easter C4  
April 17, 2016  
The Lord Is My Shepherd  
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair  
David Noble

### Psalm 23

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.

### John 10:22-30

<sup>22</sup>At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, <sup>23</sup>and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. <sup>24</sup>So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." <sup>25</sup>Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; <sup>26</sup>but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. <sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup>What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. <sup>30</sup>The Father and I are one."

1.

And the people said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

Plain talk. Straight talk. That's what they wanted. No parables. No stories. "Just the facts, ma'am," as Sgt. Joe Friday used to say on TV. Actually he never really said those exact words, but that's sort of the point. What was Jesus saying about himself?

God's mystery can be difficult to penetrate. Sometimes it's hard to grasp what Jesus is saying. Parables are designed to raise questions as much as they are aimed at giving answers. God uses a cross, of all things, to bring life. And a burning bush isn't exactly the plainest way for God to speak to a person.

Many asked and many more still ask for Jesus to be clear about himself. And he says, "I have told you, and you do not believe." The problem is, he has told us by his actions. He says, "The works that I do testify to me." The works. In other words, "I am to be experienced."

Jesus compares himself to a shepherd. That means we are the sheep! Not exactly a compliment. Sheep are dumb and dirty. And they need a leader. When I lived in Utah the street in front of my house was used by the shepherds in town to take their sheep from the winter barns in the valley to the mountain meadows for the summer. They filled the road in front of my house, and if you thought you were bad with directions you just had to laugh at these sheep who had no idea where they were going. They wandered in every direction until the shepherd, sometimes using a sheep dog, pulled them all back together and kept them moving up the street and up the mountain. During the summer months in the mountains the sheep knew the voice of their shepherd and would follow that voice to water and shelter and safety. They knew their shepherd's voice; they knew who could be trusted.

2.

We live in a rational age. These days we insist on proving and verifying and establishing what we believe to be true and trustworthy. The intellect is king of the hill when it comes to knowing something. To know is to be able to explain and prove. And scripture does tell us to love the Lord our God with “all our heart, soul, and strength, AND mind.” But Christian faith has become overly objective.

Faith has too often been distilled to words: “God is love.” “I am saved.” Jesus is Lord.” We too often equate faith with believing a creed. It’s not that these words and ideas are wrong. It’s that there’s so much more to knowing Jesus. There’s so much more to experience.

There’s an old story about an explorer who returned from the most amazing adventure, exploring the length and breadth of the great Amazon River. The people were eager to know what he had found. He tried his best to describe all the experiences he had had with the River itself and the jungle and the wildlife, and of course, the people he had met. But he could never put into words the feelings that flooded his heart when he saw the exotic flowers and heard the night-sounds of the forest, or when he sensed the danger of wild beasts, or paddled his canoe over treacherous rapids.

He said, “Go find out for yourselves.” And to guide them he drew a map of the River. They pounced upon the map. They framed it and displayed it in their Town Hall. They made copies of it for themselves. And all who had a copy considered themselves experts on the River, for did they not know its every turn and bend, how broad it was, how deep, where the rapids were and the falls?

Our balance is all wrong. We specialize in maps too much in our faith lives. Scripture is not God, it is the map that points us toward Jesus Christ. The Bible is a guide. It is a giant arrow that says, “Jesus, this way.” It cannot substitute for the real deal. And the Church is not God. The Church gathers us so we can go exploring with God and each other.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not concepts, they are living beings who yearn to engage us in life, to dance with us as they dance with each other. To journey with us so we can experience the thrill of spiritual whitewater and the exotic scents of grace and mercy and love, not so we can stare at a map and just wonder.<sup>1</sup>

On that day in Jerusalem, Jesus was at work with the people right in front of him. They experienced him in person but they wanted a report in triplicate that explained him and put him into plain words.

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 2009, p448.

3.

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Psalm 23 is always the psalm for this Sunday. Let me read it now and ask what you hear.

*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.*

What kind of verbs are these? Present tense, active, transitive.  
My shepherd leads me, restores me, makes me lie down.

*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.*

These are the verbs of an active God who was at work in days gone by and remains at work with us if we want it. This is a psalm for people who want to be aware of God whose works we can see and smell and taste and hear and touch. This is about relationship not facts. This is about belonging to our shepherd.

Everyone wants to belong. Everyone wants to belong somewhere, to be welcomed and appreciated and cared for. Do you understand how resurrection works? Or how God created everything out of nothing? Or how the cross is God's answers to our sins?

Psalm 23 doesn't care. Psalm 23 invites you to belong, to hear the voice of your shepherd, to hear Jesus' voice and delight in a relationship with him.

4.

Ernest Mitchell, we are going to ordain and install you as deacon today. As a congregation we are depending on you and your fellow deacons and the elders of this church as well, to be experiencing Jesus, to be led by Jesus, as you call us to ministry and mission. We need you to know his voice and to teach us to hear it and follow it.

So, let me read once more, slowly, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, leaving spaces of silence for all of us to consider how we are already or could be experiencing our Messiah, our Good Shepherd, our Jesus, today and every day. I invite you to close your eyes...

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...

Amen.