

April 21, 2024
Shepherding the Earth
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

“The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters.
He revives my soul”

Psalm 23 is one of the most well-known psalms

It's one of the psalms most turned to at times of distress or at the time of death

It's a psalm that reminds me that even in ancient times, the gift of green pastures and still waters could revive the soul

The imagery of God as “my” shepherd is one that is picked up in the gospel of John and comes from the very mouth of our Savior, Jesus, too: “I am the good shepherd,” said Jesus. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

It's an image like so many others in our scriptures that is countercultural and rather shocking

While it might sound lovely to have God's rod and staff to comfort us and to have Jesus as our Shepherd with us the little lambs on his shoulders, it might have felt to the original audiences more like Jesus was saying “I am the good milkman.”

A crucial and yet dated profession, absolutely honorable and yet receiving little prestige, solid work but you do sometimes come home smelling a little sour

Wouldn't an image of Jesus the good Warrior have been cooler? Or, Jesus the good politician? Jesus the good emperor?

In today's world it might be Jesus the good tech bro

What is it about our God and Jesus his son that they aren't looking for the glitzy, glamorous titles, but rather the earthy, dingy, can't-get-more-human title of shepherd?

The image is a bit lost on most of us because we don't live in communities with shepherds even though we may have neighbors who keep sheep

So, maybe it's just from being around the church for a while that I have a rather romanticized image of a shepherd

Is it not a shepherd who abandons the perceived pleasures of life to come alongside and journey with her sheep through all the trials and tribulations that come their way?

Is it not a shepherd who, aware of the patterns and practices of the world, uses their senses to guide their sheep to greener pastures and to drink from still waters?

Is it not a shepherd who puts their life between their sheep and their predators in order to save lives?

Perhaps a true shepherd, ancient or modern, would hear this and go "no! that's not what being a shepherd is at all!"

But, this is the imagery I've been taught to have about shepherds

And, more importantly it is, by extension, the imagery I've been taught to have about my God

Is it not my God who abandoned the pleasures of heaven to come alongside and journey with their people through the trials and tribulations that come their way?

Is it not my God who, aware of the brokenness of the world, uses their sensibilities to guide us toward greener pastures and to drink from still waters?

Is it not my God who puts their life between us and the predators of the world in order to save lives?

This is who the psalmist is saying God is and it's who Jesus is saying he is in John's gospel

It's one of the most common images depicted of Jesus in art, music, and prayer

Even though we have a three year liturgical cycle of readings that we rotate through, every fourth Sunday is "Good Shepherd Sunday" because of the significance of this image

God the milkman, excuse me, Jesus the Good Shepherd

Rev. Dr. Paul Nancarrow is an Episcopal priest and process theologian and he notes that "for all its beauty and traditional significance, the metaphor of the Good Shepherd falls short in one important way: no earthly shepherd expects the sheep to become more shepherd-like as they follow; but our relationship with Jesus helps us to grow into ever-increasingly Christlike versions of ourselves."¹

Yes, initially in this image of Jesus and God as the good shepherds we are to see ourselves as the bleating, listless sheep

¹ <https://processandfaith.org/lectionary-commentary/the-fourth-sunday-of-easter-april-21-2024/>

But there is an aspect to Christian teaching that encourages us to emulate Jesus how and as we can – to strive to exhibit kindness and love as he exhibited kindness and love

to show mercy and grace as Jesus showed mercy and grace

to take on the characteristics of a shepherd for those who are bleating and listless as Jesus shepherded those who were bleating and listless

What does it mean to both lean into and have faith in our God as the great shepherd, who “makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters” and at the same time see ourselves as inheritors of Jesus’ call to help shepherd the earth and all of God’s creation towards abundant life?

As we approach Earth Day tomorrow, I can’t help but think of the relationship between the Lord as the Great Shepherd and the wondrous creation which God created and to which, in scripture, God has called us to tend to, defend, and protect

This is where we are to take on some of the shepherd-like wisdom of our teacher and savior and act as shepherds of the earth, stewards of this great creation

Is it not we, Christ’s shepherds, who have both the duty and honor to abandon the perceived pleasures of life to come alongside and journey with creation through all the trials and tribulations that come her way?

Is it not we, Christ’s shepherds who, aware of the patterns and practices of the world, must use our senses to guide our communities toward greener pastures and to drink from still waters?

Is it not we, Christ’s shepherds, who put our lives between God’s creation and her predators in order to save lives?

In just a few moments, we will baptize Noah Wise into the beloved family of God and in that liturgy there is a Baptismal Covenant in which there are not only commitments of faith to be made by Noah's family, sponsor, and community, but there are also questions of commitment to the calling of discipleship

For a long time there have been five questions:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

To which we will say: I will, with God's help.

In 2018, there was a sixth question added at General Convention: Will you cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation?

To which we will also answer: I will, with God's help.

With God's help we can start to make the transformation from bleating, listless sheep, to shepherd-like stewards of all that God has made

With God's help, we might start to see the Earth truly as our mother or at least as our beloved sibling who has just as much God-given right to having life and having it abundantly

With God's help, we might find our own gifts and practices that help to ensure that there are green pastures and still waters that will revive the souls of generations to come

And we know that when the feat of trying to combat climate change feels overwhelming and insurmountable – too big for our little actions to make a difference – this is when we need to lean back into our Good Shepherd and know that “though we walk through the darkest valley, we shall fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

I pray that Rev. Dr. Nancarrow's insights might come true, that our relationship with Jesus would help us to grow into ever-increasingly Christlike versions of ourselves

A great multitude of little shepherds in the world tending to the promises we make to God and to each other in our Baptismal Covenant

I will, with God's help

Or, phrased slightly differently: With God's help, we will.

Amen.