

## Who is Your Shepherd and What Does He Want?

If we were to re-write the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm for our lives today, how might it read? How about this:

The Lord is my Shepherd. I don't really know what he wants. He makes me rush around like a maniac so I can prove to the world that I am His by being busy, busy, busy.

He leads me beside a rushing waterfall to show me how has my life OUGHT to be moving!

He exhausts my soul.

There's a really good reason why it DOESN'T read that way. We'll come back to that idea in a bit but let's take a look at today's Gospel first.

Mark's Gospel gives us a big clue about the significance of caring for our spiritual selves in the quiet. The 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter, parts of which we just read, appears to go all over the place. Jesus goes home and is rejected by his former neighbors. He then sends the twelve out to begin to spread the Gospel message and heal the people. Suddenly, we are in Herod's court reading the story of how Herod had John the Baptist killed. Just as suddenly, we are at today's lesson, with Jesus seeking rest for himself and his returned disciples. But then we skip a couple of

rather large and important events: the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on water. Instead, we jump to the idea of Jesus being recognized by crowds and many people wanting to at least touch him to be healed, quite a contrast to the opening part of the story – on purpose.

Now, we know the writer or writers of Mark did not put in chapters or verses. That was done for the convenience of study many centuries later. Mark wrote a narrative for a particular audience about thirty years after the Resurrection. We really don't know if the writer followed a strict chronology – telling things in the order they actually happened – or if stories were grouped for a purpose. What we do know is that this cluster of stories now grouped into Chapter 6, do have some definite themes. One of them is “Who is your true shepherd and how does Jesus, the Shepherd, care for us?” [Our liturgists for the day have edited the Gospel nicely for this theme!]

Why did Mark and so many others use the image of shepherd and sheep? Sheep are stupid. They are useful; they can even be cute. But they are not terribly bright. Without a shepherd they will wonder about aimlessly in large clusters. A few years ago in rural Wyoming where sheep are allowed to free-range, I came across an enormous flock literally occupying the highway. They had absolutely no inclination to move. As we carefully worked our way through the crowd, many stopped right in front of the car to stare at us – for lengthy periods of time. Some laid down in the road even when they saw us coming. And once one did,

others apparently thought it a good idea and followed suit. They didn't seem to have a care in the world. After about 45 minutes, they thought it would be a good idea to wonder off into the hills next to road for whatever reason. I haven't had the highest opinion of sheep since. Sheep can be stubborn. They will test fences and there's always at least one who will try to evade even the best sheep dog.

Aren't they just like us? What are **we** like without a shepherd? Willful, foolish, lacking direction, staring at potential danger without a clue? It's a great illustration used often in the Bible to describe the people who need God to shepherd them. [We saw it today in Jeremiah, but it's all over both the Old and New Testaments in at least 35 other places.] In the days of the writers, most people were familiar with sheep and knew the problem of a flock without a good shepherd.

Which brings us to one point in this Gospel setting. How do we know who is the RIGHT shepherd? MANY were vying for the position of Shepherd of Israel. The Roman Emperor Tiberius certainly viewed himself as a benevolent shepherd bringing Roman law and order to these wayward people. Pontius Pilate was his chosen shepherd to manage this flock by dispensing what they deemed "good" rule. The chief priests and the Sanhedrin were also claiming to be the shepherds of Israel, supposedly keeping the flock close to the faith. There is no question that Herod, as king, viewed himself as the shepherd of Israel even to the point that he thought HE might be the

messiah. These were all false shepherds! Herod was not much of a shepherd, having just capriciously killed a messenger from God on the whim of a teenaged girl. As Jesus points out repeatedly, the Priests and rulers do not have the interests of the flock in mind at all and are failing to bring the REAL love of God to the people. The Romans were just there to exploit the region.

Mark is VERY CLEAR, especially here with Herod: THERE ARE A LOT OF FALSE SHEPHERDS OUT THERE! There are many who CLAIM to act in the interest of the flock but will lead the flock disastrously for their own purposes. THERE IS ONLY ONE TRUE SHEPHERD: JESUS! Who in this story or even in this whole narrative SHOWS that he has the PEOPLE'S BEST INTERESTS in his heart AND IN HIS ACTIONS? Jesus and the disciples are exhausted and seeking isolation. Yet when the flock arrives, Jesus HAS COMPASSION, teaches them, and FEEDS THEM! HE then sends them home TO REST! Now that is what a real shepherd does!

That is the other key in today's Gospel. A GOOD SHEPHERD understands our need to rest and tend to OUR OWN spiritual needs. We need to be ISOLATED so that we may free ourselves from the worries of the world for a time to PRAY, to STUDY, to MEDITATE on God's word, and TO BE RESTORED so that we may continue to spread the joyous news of the love of God through Jesus Christ! An exhausted disciple is not an effective disciple. An exhausted disciple is likely to make poor decisions. An

exhausted disciple may well end up following a false shepherd. And there are many of them! This gospel NOT SO SUBTLY tells us that NO ONE EXCEPT JESUS is our shepherd, not political figures, or celebrities, or the rich nor the false shepherd of “being busy” – JESUS and ONLY JESUS is our shepherd! AND HIS ACTIONS PROVE HIS LIMITLESS LOVE FOR US!

NOW we come back to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: We know there is work to do, and a lot of it. Jesus tells us that all over the Gospels. The work is hard and the world is NOT very likely to appreciate it. It wears us down. Yet the Spirit and our FAITH carry us in spite of the obstacles. In our need, JESUS OUR SHEPHERD, and ONLY JESUS OUR SHEPHERD, cares for us properly, as the Psalm so eloquently tells us.

The Lord is my Shepherd: I trust the Lord, so I will not lack for anything I need to have a rich, fulfilling life in the service of my God. And what is the FIRST THING the Shepherd does? He MAKES ME lie down in green pastures!! NO OPTIONS. He didn't ask me or seek my advice. IN HIS LOVE FOR ME AND YOU, HE MAKES US LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES because our shepherd knows what is best for us! Envision lying down is a lush, green pasture, cool grass beneath you, a clear sky above. It's restful. There is nothing to worry about. Here, I can communicate with God. I can pray undisturbed. I can rest my restless spirit.

THEN, HE LEADS ME beside STILL WATERS. Not to a rushing, chaotic cataract, but STILL waters; calming, pleasant, beautiful.

Again, nothing to interfere with me TAKING THE TIME to rest and connect my spirit with the enduring love of our Creator. AND BEFORE ANY OTHER ACTION in this Psalm: He restores my soul! Why? So that rested, refreshed, strengthened and renewed, I can meet the challenges of spreading God's love to a needy and weary world. And even there, facing whatever dangers may come, my SHEPHERD will be with me. And when I THINK of his rod and his staff, his words and his actions, I am comforted. This is what the TRUE SHEPHERD does.

Friends in Christ, none of this is a call to be lazy. Oh, no! This is a call to ACTION. In our busy world God knows how vital it is that we set aside that quiet time to be in communion with God. God loves us SO MUCH, that he WANT US to spend that time together, to be filled with the spirit, bathed in the love of God then sent forward to bring the TRUE message of love and peace to our world. Let us be wise enough to listen both when God the Shepherd calls us to action AND when God the Shepherd calls us to rest and restore our souls.

May this God, who knows us and loves us, bless you richly in this week to come.