

“Best Companion”

Psalm 23; First Peter 2: 19-25; John 10: 1-10

Today we have what might be the most beautiful poem ever written, Psalm 23. The King James Version of the Bible which we used is especially lovely. Maybe you know it by heart, maybe not. We have probably all heard it at one time or another.

I like to have this psalm as part of a funeral, when I officiate at one. That is not because it is a sad Psalm. No, it is because this is “a psalm of confidence,” according to one author. (The Message of the Psalms, by Walter Brueggemann.)

There are some really nice comments by him, about Psalm 23, which I would like to share with you. This psalm tells “of a life lived in trustful receptivity of God’s gifts.” It says that “Life with [God] is a life of well-being and satisfaction.’ And that [God] is the satisfaction of all wants and needs.” “Psalm 23 knows that evil is present in the world, but it is not feared.” Most of all, most importantly: “It is God’s companionship that transforms every situation.” (Brueggemann.)

Think of that! When we have God’s companionship, when we have God in our lives and always with us, every bit of our lives is affected, and affected for the better. Isn’t that wonderful? Isn’t that comforting?

With the way the Psalm goes, as well as Jesus’ words in the Scripture lesson from John, and the words in the one from First Peter, God is depicted as a shepherd. That was a very familiar concept to the people in Jesus’ time, as well as in the Old Testament.

In America, in 2020, not so much. There are sheep, but you don’t hear too much about shepherds taking care of them.

Now, I have never myself kept sheep, or had much to do with them. So, please forgive me if my references to sheep are not quite right. In fact, I will just go by the way sheep were kept and regarded in Israel, 2000 years ago and more.

For one thing, then, sheep were raised mainly for their wool, rather than their meat. Also, sheep were not kept in large fenced pastures. They had to be led to pasture, and led by someone they were familiar with, someone they trusted.

Not only that, but pasturage was scarce, and there were lots of dangers to the sheep, from wild animals, like wolves, and steep cliffs and edges to fall off. So, the shepherd guided and protected the sheep.

From what I have read, sheep are not too smart. However, they know their own shepherd and listen to him. Or for that matter, they know their own shepherdess and listen to her.

If we compare sheep to human beings, in terms of that, it almost seems like we humans are too smart for our own good!

All too often, we think that we ourselves know best, rather than God. But, oh, no, that is never the case. God is the one to follow. God is the companion we need.

Jesus, of course, is the shepherd God specifically sent to us, as a human being to show us the way and to offer salvation. He said so himself, to a crowd of people listening to him. However, when Jesus' hearers did not understand this one, he moved on and tried again.

This time, Jesus referred to himself as a gate or door, the door to the best way of life. It was if he were saying: "My way is the way of peace and love and life; and if you will only take it, it leads ever closer and closer to God." (The Gospel according to John, volume 2, William Barclay.)

"Jesus opens the way to God." (John, Barclay)

And yet, so often, we just want our own way. As it says in the lyrics to one of our hymns, "my heart forever is wandering." ("Thy Word is a Lamp," words by Amy Grant.) The Bible verse we had in First Peter puts it this way: "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."

Think about that, the Lord is the guardian of our souls. It turns out that "guardian" is a very important word.

The meaning of it, in the times of the Bible, included "protector of public safety; the guardian of honour and truth and honesty; the administrator of public law and order." (The Letters of James and Peter, by William Barclay.)

Wow! That is really something! So that means that the Lord is “our Guardian, our Protector, our Guide, and our Director.” (Letters, Barclay.)

The truth is we need every bit of that! We need “a Guardian, a Protector, a Guide, and a Director.” We always need these.

Yet, perhaps, at this point in time, we need them more than ever. We are in a time and situation in which we have never been before. As it has been said, there is an invisible enemy. This COVID-19 pandemic is affecting and disrupting everything! Schools, employment, church, you name it! Even as we plan to open everything up again, we are heading for a “new and different normal.”

Even good manners have had to change. Did we ever think it would be rude and dangerous to shake hands with someone?

But, as Christians, as people of faith, we have some help. We have God as our companion—transforming every situation. Some of us have the opportunity to spend more time with the people and the pets in our homes and families. Some of us have the opportunity to serve God and humanity through our occupations.

Our public libraries are closed, but we have time to read the books in our own homes, or order new ones, if that is affordable. And houses, and gardens, and yards are getting lots of care and attention, finally! All those things we have meant to get around to doing? Well, here is our chance!

They say pollution has declined, and the air and sky are cleaner than they have been in years. We can benefit from that. We are learning to have gratitude for every good thing we have, every good thing that comes our way.

I am not saying there are not hardships. However, there are some bits of good, too. God is bringing some good things out of this situation. God always does that, in God’s infinite wisdom and goodness and love.

We are remembering who is in charge of us—God. We are remembering that we need God; we need faith; we need trust in God.

And God, our beloved companion, will provide. God does provide. We just have to accept that, and rely on the Almighty. Amen.

Presented by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, May 3, 2020.