

Where the Shepherd Led

Lesson: Psalm 23, I Peter 2:19-24, Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23: From beginning to end, the beauty of the song is in what the Shepherd does for the sheep and what the sheep do for the shepherd.- "I shall not want. I have everything I need," "I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

The King James version that many of us memorized has the last verse wrong, and it misleads us about the song. The whole point is not what the shepherd does for us forever, but what we do our whole life long. We "dwell in the house of the Lord," because we have everything we need.

"I shall not want." Sheep don't really need all that much: green grass, still water, a secure path, and someone to lead us down the slope in the deep, dark canyon of life's dangers. Protection from the hidden unknowns of poisons, and from the evil of predators of all kinds who would do us harm. Medical care for cuts and a cup that overflows. Why sheep need goodness and mercy, I don't know, except that they are one of the stupid species, and a shepherd can't expect that much from them.

"We are all like sheep," says Isaiah, "and we have gone astray." Maybe the reason we love Psalm 23 is that we are not so smart as we usually think we are. We aren't as good as we wish. We need the mercy. We need someone who will love and care for us no matter what, because as soon as we are out of the danger of the dark canyon we start looking around for a place to wander away from the shepherd. We know he loves us; we know he will come looking to rescue us.

What makes us wander when we have everything we need in the shepherd's care? Well, it has nothing to do with the "needs." We don't live on needs. We are past that. Once you get what you need, you start ...wanting. You start living for wants. I get some wants that start feeling like needs. Right now, I really need a new camera. My old one is out-dated for the endless digital revolution. I've upgraded my phone three times since I bought the camera 8 years ago. The old one is still taking photos like it did when it was new, but the new ones take such better photos? Do I sound like I'm way down the road to confusing wants and needs? What about you? I'm betting you thought of something you could substitute for camera, and say basically what I have just said.

What would it be like for us to live with complete contentment in a shepherd's care? Our sheep problem is that we are not smart enough, ...no, not honest enough with ourselves to know the difference between our "needs" and our "wants." Our wants can become big enough in our minds that we take for granted, or even forget that we have everything we really need. And how many of us ever think about how little we really need? Here in the "house of the Lord" it is easier to be content with needs. But out there? ...Well, there are just so many things to want, and no shepherd's rod and staff to keep us from wandering.

Jesus says he is "the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep." The image became the primary picture of the Lord in the early centuries of the new followers who started calling themselves the *ekklesia* - what the King James translated

“church” because we don’t have a better word. *ekklesia* really means “the company of the called-out ones.” A shepherd’s flock was an *ekklesia*. They thought of themselves as the ones who no longer wandered over the hillsides, because they followed the good shepherd and lived their whole life in his fold and had everything they needed.

Here we are in the house of the Lord. We are in the flock and in the fold, and we have confessed that we have the wrong wants, and asked for mercy and received it again. Here it is easier to see the difference between wants and needs when we see we are called out to be sheep of the flock, and it is easier to see that the needs list is a lot smaller after we move some needs we think we have back over to the wants list where they belong.

Now that we are focused on the real living of “our whole life long,” we are ready to see the lesson of the early *ekklesia* in these events immediately following the coming of the risen Shepherd. As Holy Spirit, Christ leads them and gives them “everything they need” so they would not want. This group – called together to be followers of the good shepherd – shared meals and prayers, learned from the leaders and were filled with awe over signs and wonders. They were content, “eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God and enjoying the good will of all the people.” Our church can identify with their *ekklesia*.

They “continued in close fellowship and shared their belongings. They sold off their surplus belongings, pooled the money, so that no one had a need. Well, we can’t identify so much on that point. It may have worked for them for a while, but surely it didn’t last. Sooner or later, you have to live in the real world.

Now before we jump to all kinds of “let’s get realistic” counters and caveats, let’s remember a few things about events in that upper room. What they did has absolutely nothing to do with any politics or economics. It had everything to do with Christ’s Spirit in their room. We can’t impose some kind of liberal or conservative thinking on an interpretation of this passage, but they were neither. We can’t get all excited about economic theories about “capitalism” or “socialism” or “communism” that don’t appear on the scene for more than a thousand years after the *ekklesia* pooled all their surplus into money to meet the needs of people who had needs. We do probably need to remember that all those “..isms” are “...isms.” An “...ism” is an organized belief system, a practice or philosophy, an ideology or religion. So, **capitalism** and **socialism**, **conservatism** and **liberalism** are all kinds of belief systems that act like religions or ideologies, or idolatries.

They just followed where the Shepherd led. The *ekklesia* was practicing their faith in the Shepherd, their trust of the Holy Spirit of the risen Jesus by continuing to follow what he had told them to do that week before they crucified him: they started loving others the way he had loved them. He had taught them how to pool their surplus resources to help people in real need, and they had seen how little they really needed to perform signs of God’s love, wonders of change in people’s lives, miracles of transformation in the community outside that little room. “Every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved,” says the text.

They spent no time at all thinking of all the reason they could not afford to live the way they had seen Jesus live. In fact, they focused so much of trying to be like Jesus that they grew so fast that they had to organize a system to make sure that the Gentile poor were helped just like the Jewish poor. They didn't call it "welfare" or any other label. They named the people in charge of the helping "diaconos" - Deacons. The first ordained office in the new "company of the called out ones" were the people God had called to organize the food pantry.

So, before we start thinking about how different the 21st century is and how we know that what they did in those early days of Spirit enthusiasm just doesn't work for the modern world or the modern church, let's ask ourselves why we think it will never work. I'm *not* asking about why it will never work to solve the problem of world hunger. I'm asking why we think of all the reasons it will never work in our little *ekklesia*. Same Lord, same Spirit, same Love, same Power now as back then. The power of the Spirit still works as much as we do the Spirit's work.

We are a "company of the called-out ones." We are called to follow where the shepherd leads. We are the ones who have banded together to learn from the leaders and to share fellowship meals and prayer. We have witnessed signs of God's leading and power to do more than we can imagine, and we have seen the wonder of Christ's risen Spirit just recently that gives us more than optimism about the next chapter of our little company's ministry. Grace and hope have filled this room with power.

All those "...ism" labels are just excuses for us sheep to wander from the road and distract the Shepherd's time and effort chasing us down instead of leading us to signs and wonders, ...and maybe even another miracle or two in our little *ekklesia*. The Good Shepherd can get us further down his road if we stay in it and keep our eyes "fixed on Jesus" the way the scripture says we should. If we do, we won't have that much trouble with the "wants" because we will want what he wants, and we will only need what he already gives in the "grace that is sufficient for our every need."

We can trust the leading of the good shepherd, ...and I don't mean your new Teaching Elder Elect. I have a pretty good idea that she is going to teach you about the One Good Shepherd, because she will be following on his heels and trying to keep you in the path. Where the *ekklesia* goes is up to all of us and each of you, and the lesson here is pretty much too easy to understand. They acted like "the company of the called-out ones." They banded together and bonded together in fellowship and prayer. They gave themselves to the Lord, and to the *ekklesia* who could do more following him together than any one of them could do wandering around with the wants. The words of the old hymn had become very real for them all, and I suspect it was a favorite they sang by heart because they lived it:

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. I have everything I need.
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.