

A Sermon for Easter 4, Year B
Good Shepherd Sunday
May 7, 2005
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Tiger or Shepherd?

Today's reading from the gospel provides us with a descriptive name for this Fourth Sunday of Easter, which is Good Shepherd Sunday. And it doesn't take a genius to realize that the image of Jesus as a shepherd, and as *our* shepherd, is one of the most beloved and enduring of such images.

However, it's an image that's counter-intuitive, for, as one writer noted, "a shepherd who's any good, whether in first-century Galilee or twenty-first-century Galway, doesn't die for his sheep, any more than he abandons ninety-nine of them to chase after one that's wandered off." I guess that could be a problem, and, according to one Anglican priest, there was a time in England, in the early 60s, when many priests were discouraged from talking about sheep in their sermons – since sheep are rural beasts and most priests serve in urban settings – unless, of course, your parish was in a rural part of England, and then it was okay, because it was an image to which people could relate. Thus, a forward-thinking priest, who served an urban congregation, preached on a revised form of today's gospel: And Jesus said, "I am the real crankshaft; everything revolves around me." (It does lose something in the translation, doesn't it?)

Nevertheless, even though most of us have only limited exposure to shepherds and sheep, this imagery continues to be popular, and one of the favorite passages of scripture that supports this image is the twenty-third psalm.

At first blush, it's a pretty powerful text, which begins: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want." And it would be easy to come to the conclusion that the New Testament's equivalent to this passage is Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31b) All of which is fine, except for the fact that it makes God sound like a talisman or good luck charm.

In fact, there is an old Chinese tale about a fox that was captured by a tiger. The fox said to the Tiger, "You can't eat me because the gods have made me the leader of all the animals." The tiger did not believe him, but the fox said, "Follow me and see if any animal challenges me." The tiger agreed to this and followed directly behind the fox as the fox began his walk through the forest. To the tiger's amazement it turned out to be exactly as the fox had said. Not a single animal they encountered challenged the fox. In fact, every animal they met fled in sheer panic. After several such encounters the tiger finally agreed that the fox was indeed the leader of all the animals and let him go.

Now, the moral of the tale is this: It's easy to remove obstacles that oppose us, when we have a tiger behind us. But is this really what the psalmist is trying to tell us? And did Paul actually intend to suggest that, with the Good Shepherd on our side, or at least on our tail, that nothing bad would ever happen to us?

Although there have been a lot of books written about the twenty-third psalm, I like what Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote in "The Lord is My Shepherd," a meditation on the twenty-third psalm, written in the aftermath of the 9/11 disasters. In an interview, Kushner said this:

Right after 9/11, when everybody was asking me, "Where was God that Tuesday? How could God have let such a thing happen?" the answer I found myself giving was, "God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was, when it's your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you'll be able to handle it, because He'll be on your side. He will give you the strength you need to find your way through ... The psalmist is not saying, "I will fear no evil because evil only happens to people who deserve it." He's saying, "This is a scary, out-of-control world, but it doesn't scare me, because I know that God is on my side, not on the side of the hijacker. God is on my side, not on the side of the illness, or the accident, or the terrible thing that happened. And that's enough to give me the confidence." The twenty-third Psalm is the answer to the question, "How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?"

And another writer made these observations about the twenty-third psalm:

"If we look [at it closely] we will find that the 23rd Psalm was composed by an older shepherd reflecting upon the nature of God's presence with him through the journey of life ... We are sustained by the memory of what God *has done* even when we cannot see what God *is doing* at the present."

At a church I used to attend as a teenager, the parish secretary was a woman whose response, to any bit of news you might tell her, was "Well, praise the Lord!" If you had told her that she had just won the jackpot, she'd say, "Well, praise the Lord!" which seemed to be an appropriate response. But if you'd told her that her teenage son had just totaled the family car, she'd still say "Well, praise the Lord!" which didn't seem quite as appropriate. And for years, I thought she was simply a religious nut, detached from any semblance of reality. But now that I've nearly fifty years of living behind me, I can see where she was coming from, and recognize in her something very much like what was in the author of the twenty-third psalm: She might not have been able to see what God *was doing* in her life at that moment, nevertheless her faith was sustained by the memory of what God *had done* in her life in the past.

Although there was a time in my spiritual journey when, in matters of faith and hope, I prayed that I would never become like that parish secretary. Nowadays, however, I tend to hope that one day I might become more like her; having faith in God no matter what.

Even though the imagery of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is counter-intuitive, and, as I noted earlier, a shepherd who's any good doesn't die for his sheep, or abandons ninety-nine of them to chase after one that's wandered off. But I still find comfort, strange though it may be, in the knowledge that our Shepherd will do just that.

Let us pray: Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, you have brought us in safety to this new day: Preserve us with your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin, nor be overcome by adversity; and in all we do, direct us to the fulfilling of your purpose; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.