

Grace and Hope in Abundance 2021
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23 John 10:10-18

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23 (New Revised Standard Version)

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

John 10:10b-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

A couple years ago Kathy and I went on a wonderful trip to Scotland.

It seemed like everywhere we went
we could see sheep out the windows of the tour bus
grazing peacefully in the green hillside pastures,
but I don't remember seeing any shepherds out caring for them.

I suppose fenced safely inside the lush green fields of Scotland,
it wasn't necessary for a shepherd to tend the sheep closely.

When I traveled in the Middle East, I saw lots of sheep there too,
but in that sparse and harsh desert environment,
there was always attentive shepherds nearby
watching, guarding & caring for their sheep.

One time in an extremely remote & desolate part of the Sinai desert
we stopped, got out to see some ancient Nabatean stone-writings.
Then seemingly out from nowhere
a young Bedouin girl showed up with some trinkets to sell,
along with a dozen scrawny little sheep trailing behind her.

I was amazed that anything could survive in such a barren place,
and I can't imagine how she managed to keep her flock alive.

In sharp contrast to the sheep in Scotland,
she kept a constant and close and attentive eye on them,
and whenever one of our group would move or speak,
her little flock would startle with fear and panic.

But then she would cluck and her voice would soothe them by name,
and they would visibly relax and go back to searching for food.

There was an unmistakable and very special bond that they shared,
as they followed her around like puppies and stayed close by.

And in that incredibly harsh and fiercely foreboding environment
those timid little sheep were entirely dependent on
the protection, provision and care of their shepherd girl.

Reflecting on young Bedouin shepherd girl's care for her sheep
helped deepen and enrich my understanding and appreciation
for the 23rd Psalm that we read as our Call to Worship today.

Psalm 23:1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
My God, my shepherd provides all that I need,
and under the Lord's loving & gracious care I lack nothing,
for my shepherd is steadfast, wise and merciful.

My Shepherd is always present to guide me, to sustain & comfort me.
My shepherd knows me completely and yet **loves me anyway**,
providing for my care, my needs, my growth and well-being.

vs. 2 "He makes me lie down in green pastures"
In real life, sheep are timid, skittish and easily startled.

Though sheep must be able lie down in peace to digest food,
but they won't unless they feel safe, calm and secure,
fed, watered and protected by their shepherd nearby.

vs. 2b "He leads me beside still waters"
a good shepherd knows where there is water - even in the desert
and keeps the sheep from polluted puddles of stagnant water.

**A good shepherd is attentive in providing still water for the flock
since a sheep will not drink from a rapidly flowing stream.**

vs. 3 "He leads me in the right paths"
Much of Palestine is inhospitable, a hostile **desolate wilderness**
so the sheep must be constantly moved to fresh ranges
requiring travel along steep treacherous mountain paths.

**We learn that we can trust the Holy Spirit to lead us through
all the difficult and dangerous wilderness places of life...**
... even seasons of Covid danger, fear and isolation.

vs. 4a "Even though I walk through the darkest valley"
To reach fresh grazing areas up in the mountain pastures,
sheep must pass through dangerous crags, shadowy valleys
where predators may lurk in those narrow & tight places.

The sheep must rely on the shepherd to protect and guide them,
and trust that after the journey through dark valleys
they will reach a mountaintop of abundant rich pasture.

vs. 4b "Your rod and your staff -- they comfort me"
rod and staff are two separate shepherd tools

rod:

it's like a club used against predators who threaten sheep

staff:

familiar stick w/ hook on it used in Christmas pageants
used to guide the sheep hook to pull from difficult places

vs. 5a "You prepare a table before me"

Before sheep can be allowed to graze on a range the shepherd
must check for poisonous weeds, snakes and other dangers.

vs. 5b "You anoint my head with oil"

Shepherds carry flasks of anointing oil,
a mixture of olive oil, sulfur and spices
that guards against fleas, flies, parasites
and helps heal cuts, scrapes and wounds.

vs. 6 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.

God's goodness and mercy are wonderfully always present
and through the Holy Spirit, for God never gives up on me.

**Now to be honest, I am not entirely pleased or happy
with that sheep and shepherd image and metaphor ----**

- since in real life, sheep are usually dirty and smelly,
willful and obstinate, not the brightest even among animals,
and they do tend to get themselves lost and into danger...
... and I am, of course, nothing at all like that.

One time a construction crew was hired to resurface a driveway,
and had a large vat of warm tar on the back of their truck.
A little neighbor boy climbed up the side of the vat
and was leaning over, poking at the tar with a stick.

His mother suddenly noticed him hanging over the vat of tar.
She shouted his name, ordering him to come down immediately,
and the started boy slipped and fell into the sticky tar.

One of the construction workers saw him, quickly rushed over,
reached down and was able to pull the boy out of the tar.
He set him down dripping with tar in front of his mother,
who exclaimed, **"It might be easier to have another one,
then trying to wash and clean this one."**

Looking back at my life,
at the messes, mistakes and misadventures I've gotten into,
especially when it's been my own fault and failure,
**I wonder if God has ever had the same thought about me,
easier to start over than to try and clean this one up...**

... but as we know that's not the nature, character or way of the Lord.

**Our reliable hope is God's promise all through Scripture,
that we can trust that God will never give up on any of us –
--- and that God creates a new beginning and new possibilities for us.**

That truth and perspective shines all through the Ezekiel passage,

which speaks with great clarity and certainty about God's promise.

The prophet Ezekiel wrote during the Babylonian exile,
a terrible and bitter experience of tragic loss & suffering.

The first 33 chapters of the book of Ezekiel describe
the terrible cost and consequences of Israel's faithlessness,
that because of their idolatry & disobedience against God,
and having ignored all the many clear prophetic warnings
they themselves had caused their defeat and exile.

But in this passage from chapter 34,
God addresses their hopeless situation of defeat and exile,
with words of hope, God's assurance of grace and restoration,
that comes as a wonderful cascade of "I will" promises.

Listen from Ezekiel, all that God promises to accomplish for us,
and notice how very many times God says, "I will". vs. 11~16

For thus says the Lord GOD:

I myself will search for my sheep, and **will seek them out.** As shepherds seek out their flocks,
their scattered sheep, so

I will seek out my sheep. **I will rescue** them ... **I will feed** them ... I will feed them with good
pasture ...

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, says the Lord GOD. **I will seek the lost,** and **I will
bring back the strayed,** and **I will bind up the injured,** and **I will strengthen the weak.**

In this Ezekiel text, God is promising to seek out and rescue
the lost and the defeated failures who have messed up their lives,
by offering renewed hope and the possibility of restoration,
even to those who are justly suffering and enduring
the consequences of their own dreadful decisions.

We know that sometimes we fail and foul things up in terrible ways,
and often make wrong choices and some very foolish compromises.
We also know that our lives can get very messy and complicated,
and at times we do and say things that we at least **ought to regret.**

But the truth and good news is, that despite all that history,
we are still the precious and beloved sheep of God's pasture,
who seeks and finds us even when it's our fault we got lost.

The amazing truth of God's grace is that the strayed & lost sheep
has done nothing to prompt or cause the Shepherd's search
other than managing to stray, to get lost and in trouble.

But as the prophet Nehemiah declared, vs. 9:17

You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and
you do not forsake us.

God's grace and providence provides the possibility and promise
that even the worst situations of our mistakes and failures
can be transformed into renewed & hopeful **re-beginnings.**

Truly God is gracious, infinitely loving, compassionate and good ---
and whatever has been in our past, our failures and defeats,
we can trust Jesus to build with it, and bless our future,

as in our weakness, we let God be our strength... (vs. 10),

as Jesus explained, I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

That relationship of grace **between the Good Shepherd and sheep leads to the life in abundance that Jesus intends for us...
... hope and change as an outward sign of invisible grace.**

This passage from the Gospel of John comes shortly before his death on the cross and his resurrection on Easter through which Jesus fulfilled all the “I will” promises of Ezekiel, finding us, & binding our wounds where we’ve been hurt & broken.

John’s Gospel is about the life, the purpose and mission of Jesus, who was sent by God as promised through the prophets, vs. 11-12, 14-15

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

In this passage from John, Jesus identifies as **the Good Shepherd.**

The word ‘good’ is also translated as authentic, ideal and true in contrast to something that is not authentic, good and true, such as the religious leaders who opposed Jesus & killed him.

As the true and good shepherd, Jesus came to seek the lost, bind the wounds of the hurt & broken, welcome the outcast, and provide for the sheep under his care and compassion.

Knowing and following the Good Shepherd brings us true healing and hope, salvation and transformation, and changes how we perceive & relate to others and to the world.

As we walk through life’s valleys of darkness and despair, we are not afraid, alone or abandoned to our troubles & failures, for the shepherd is close by who loves us with eternal care.

Our God who seeks the lost and wounded, and brings us home again.

And because the Holy Spirit-Shepherd is faithful and present, it is certain that we shall dwell in the house of Lord forever.

That is the true Gospel message of God’s grace and compassion, the Good News by which we are saved into Jesus Christ, and the true message of God’s grace that the Church is called and equipped to live out and proclaim...

... which can only happen as we know and grow in Christ, in the healing of our broken human hearts & damaged lives, as we rest and refresh in the pasture of the Good Shepherd.

When I was a little boy, one of the men of our church gave me a booklet about shepherd & sheep of the Psalm 23.

When he handed it to me, I saw that he’d written inside the cover,

“To my young friend Norman.

It’s very good to know the psalm.

It’s necessary to know the Shepherd.”

My friends, **it is necessary to know the Good Shepherd.**