

**Better Than Any Map or GPS**  
April 13, In the Year of Our LORD, 2008  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

John 10:1-10 and Psalm 23

A retired English Teacher in the Warsaw congregation counted how many times I ended sentences with prepositions- which occurred most often when I was “out there” preaching without notes and sometimes scrambling to remember what came next. Her greeting at the church door at the end of services was simply a number. “Four” or “Good, only once.” That was it; a handshake and a number. That said, the scolding I recall most vividly was after a sermon based on Psalm 23, when I mentioned that sheep were not all that smart. My point was that we, like sheep, and to quote scripture, “have gone astray,” and need a Shepherding God.

The problem on that particular day was that a member of the congregation was a veterinarian. Actually, she was an octogenarian veterinarian. Think how that would sound had she been a vegetarian as well! Anyway, this older, stately, graduate of Cornell University, would proudly display her License from the State of New York: Veterinarian License Number 11.

A backdrop: *my* perspective of sheep came from the unscientific observations of a six year old from the bedroom window on Primelweg 3 in Grünwald, then West Germany, just south of München (Munich). I could look out on a vast field where, as often as not, sheep grazed, with a shepherd and his dog to mind and tend them. My friend, and that she was, ... my friend the octogenarian veterinarian was not happy with me because she claimed sheep were not all that dumb or stupid, that in many ways they were smarter than humans. There are times, of course, when she is undoubtedly right – and I admit that from that bedroom window, I never saw sheep fight, battle one another, or (with the aid of an ever watchful sheepdog) go that far from the flock and the protective shelter accorded by the patient shepherd. Comparison to the intelligence of most humans falls apart for those reasons alone!

Today was a Sunday neither Carol Anne or I were to preach as a candidate for a position in our Presbytery was to use this lectern as a “neutral pulpit” to be seen and heard by a Nominating Committee. Last Sunday evening, I was informed the candidate withdrew her name from consideration – and so here I am. As soon as I knew I would be preaching, I turned to the lectionary for this morning. Lo and behold, the primary lessons are two about which so much has been written; Psalm 23, because it is among the most familiar of the Old Testament and the John 10:1-10 because some, frankly, find it convoluted if not somewhat confusing.

In human relations, Aesop wrote “familiarity breeds contempt.” In terms of well-known words, I suspect familiarity breeds a sense of the ordinary. Perhaps the exceptionality and uniqueness of words and phrases get lost in frequent reading or memorization. So, as familiar and seemingly timeless as are the words of the LORD’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed or the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, we take opportunities to read and hear them again so that in further exploring their meaning for us, these familiar words of our faith can move from being mere words of the past to those that are *timeless* and *timely*, that speak to us in significant and faith-filled ways in the here and now.

How wonderful it is to have words of Scripture guide and direct us on our life journeys – to remind us, in as many ways as possible, that God is here for us through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, ... God is here to show us the way through all the potential pitfalls and difficulties – towards if not to the ways of grace, redemption, salvation, peace – and in a *manner* that is shaped by hope, joy and love.

Scripture is a *bit* like a map or a GPS guidance system. Scripture shows us how real people of long ago navigated through real problems and in so many instances found their way through their difficulties, pains and losses to finding their way in the world, their place in God's plan for their lives, and how they might serve the greater good as part of Christ's family, the church.

Passages from the Bible may not lay out a route as does a road map from AAA or show us elevations and demographics as might a topographical map. We are intrigued by the wondrous hybrid maps to which we turn on the internet which show actual images of everything between points "a" and "b" – but verses like the six that comprise the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm are certainly graphic enough. As to road maps, does David not speak of "right paths?" As to topographical maps ... does the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm not speak of "green pastures," "still waters" and "dark valleys?"

"Right paths," "green pastures," "still waters" and "dark valleys" are *only* metaphors. The point of metaphors is the greater truth to which they point. To call God or Christ "Shepherd," to suggest they actually hold a staff or rod or actually tend us as though we were in fact, sheep, ... is that not somewhat limiting? The point of a metaphor is to help us understand *a* truth about our God, but another inherent truth is that no one metaphor can encompass the full definition of our God. For example, for all of the references to God that uses male imagery, do we not understand that God is beyond, above so narrow a definition? Just think how narrowly we proscribe a definition of God whenever our Creator is portrayed as an "old, *white*, bearded, man!"

How often our perspective clouds what we see, hear and experience. More than twenty of us who attended the musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" yesterday at the Auditorium Theater, and as wonderful as the production was, a few of us could not help but comment on one obvious disconnect when it came to the role of Jesus Christ. While intriguing to be in the presence of the man who starred in that lead role in the movie, the film was produced in 1973 and Tim Neeley is now 65 years old. He looks it, and some of us could not get the "Jesus doesn't look 33" idea out of our poor heads.

There are people who wince when they hear scholars and preachers, commentators and students, ordained and laypersons delve into Scripture in ways that seem to dissect if not critique the words. The logical lament is: "These are God's words – let them speak for themselves! Stop interpreting what doesn't need interpretation!" Well, unfortunately, it isn't that easy – for as God-directed as so much of Scripture is, men put the words to parchment and paper, men translated the words from one language to others, and in the case of the Gospels, men recorded what they remembered from years before.

The problem that some find in our reading from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John is that there *appears* to be an odd mix of metaphors. At first, Jesus is the Shepherd Who calls the sheep from the sheepfold to follow Him. Those words echo the familiar words of David's Shepherd Psalm. But then, in this same set of verses, Jesus is the gatekeeper to the sheepfold. Which is He? The shepherd or the gatekeeper?

Members of our Bible Class joined me in approaching this passage in John by asking the question from a different vantage point! Since when is Jesus *not* the personification of multiple metaphors, allegories, roles? Jesus is the Shepherd. Jesus is the gatekeeper. Just think how we could further mix the metaphors by using oft-used reference to Jesus as the “Lamb of God!”

Look at our Opening Prayer and see all of the ways that God is defined and comes to us in those six sentences: Waiting God ... Nurturing God ... Nourishing God ... Tending God ... Companion God ... Liberating God ... Welcoming God.

In all of this there is a significant truth: our faith in God as Creator, Christ and the Holy Spirit not only gives us the means by which to navigate our way through all of the circumstances of our lives – and in ways that are far more significant than any paper or digital map or even the most sophisticated guidance system. Christ not only directs us - Christ is the goal. You and I use maps as the means to get from one place to another – as a means to an end. Our faith tells us that Christ is the means *and* the ends.

Now listen to how members of our Adult Bible class put the six verses of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in their own words – especially in the context of God as both the means and the ends of our faith:

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

- The LORD is the One Who guides me, therefore my needs will be met.
- The LORD is my mentor and I will only need guidance for my life from the LORD.
- The LORD is my Guardian, I shall be content.
- God is my caretaker, ... will fill all of my needs.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters,

- When I am troubled, God provides rest and quiet.
- He makes me live in [a] clean environment which includes clean running waters.

3 He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

- He guides me ... .
- When I face tough decisions, God shows me the way ... (but I don't always take it).
- Even in the most trying of times, when I am exhausted, I will be OK, because God is with me, like a Shepherd, Whose rod shoves away my fears and staff that pulls me from my doldrums.

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

- No matter how dire the outlook, I will not be afraid, because God's presence is always with me and calms me.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

- When all around me is unfriendly, You ... bless me; I am filled with everlasting joy.

6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

- My life will be blessed by Your presence.
- I will be blessed for all of my life and I will be in the presence of the LORD forever.

The wonder and beauty that comes when more than one of us looks at Scripture, is that the words become all the more alive, all the fuller in their description, and all the deeper in the sense of meaning and substance. The gift that came to me on Wednesday evening in Bible Class was not only content for an otherwise non-existent sermon, but a reminder that to use but one or two metaphors or descriptions to fully describe our God is just plain wrong. It is a little bit like only using a topographical map that doesn't include the street names or a street map that doesn't show topography – or worse that doesn't show which way is south or west or east or north – ... or it is like using a GPS that shows points “a” and “b” but doesn't tell you about road construction and that a detour is in order on that particular day. I know, I know, today there probably are GPSs that probably do exactly that – but you get my point.

On the other hand, God, through Christ, gives us all of the means to find our way – from whatever starting point we are at a given point to all of the destinations our faith will take us – what we will do, filled with God's grace, in the here and now, this very day, ... what we will do the rest of this coming week before returning to worship next Sunday – and what we will do for the rest of our days on earth before we are embraced at the final destination of our lives – in the Kingdom of God where all is well, every metaphor is set aside in the true presence, majesty, glory, love and joy that is ours in the blessed company of our God.

Amen.