

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, August 21, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 23
Best-laid plans

The best-laid plans of mice and ministers gang aft agley, as Robert Burns didn't exactly say. I chose the text for this service. I found the hymns to fit. And I had the bare bones of the sermon in my mind. I was pretty sure I knew where it was going to go. But when I sat down to write it, I found the Spirit kept nudging me in a different direction.

In the direction of the funeral and two memorial services that New St James will experience in less than two weeks. And of the news of a colleague who was diagnosed earlier this summer with breast cancer. And of the disappointing news of the less-than-hoped-for progress that a friend is making after a fall. And of the shocking news of a friend who has been diagnosed with cancer of the bone.

I don't want to set aside the Jeremiah passage that Jeanine read for us. It says something important to us today about God's call to discipleship and service. But the nudging of the Spirit is too much to ignore. And so I want to redirect your thoughts to another passage. One that I don't think needs any real introduction.

Psalm 23

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

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

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.

What can be said about the 23rd Psalm that hasn't been said before, and probably said better than I could ever say it? It has to be the loveliest and the best-loved expression of the most common description in the Bible of the relationship between God and God's people: that of a shepherd and his flock.

I remember when I was young, seeing shepherds moving their sheep along country roads of Scotland, their dogs running back and forth, responding to the shepherd's shouts and whistles, keeping the flock moving in the direction they were supposed to go, and stopping them galloping off madly in all directions, as sheep are wont to do.

And I remember my father sitting at the wheel of the car, waiting for the flock to pass by, if it was coming towards us, or to get out of the way if we were caught behind them. And if we were caught behind them, striking up a conversation with the shepherd as he walked along, driving the flock forward. You rarely see a sight like that on the roads nowadays, of course. The pace of life, the volume of traffic and increased mechanisation mean that sheep have to be moved about by truck.

When I was being interviewed for my first charge in Scotland, I remember meeting a tall, distinguished-looking, older man dressed in immaculate tweeds. My first thought was that he must be the local landowner, the Earl of Leven and Melville. I later found out that he was Hugh McArthur, one of my elders. Hugh was unfailingly courteous, and one of the wisest, most thoughtful and most gracious men I have ever met. He was a retired shepherd.

Shepherds in Biblical times didn't, and shepherds today in Israel/Palestine still don't, drive their flocks ahead of them the way Scottish shepherds did. Rather than walking behind them, controlling their dogs with shouts and whistles to keep the sheep heading in the right direction, shepherds in Biblical times walked ahead of the sheep. And the sheep followed along behind, almost like pets following a beloved master.

Which sheds an important light on our thinking about the LORD as our Shepherd. The shepherd walks ahead of the flock to find the green pastures in which he makes me lie down; he leads me beside still waters; he leads me in right paths. And when life is not all about green pastures and still waters and right paths, when the path on which he leads me takes me through the darkest valley, even then I need fear no evil; for the shepherd is with me, leading the way through, in fact, and his rod and his staff are for my protection.

Jesus picks up on the shepherd image and applies it to himself in John 10. He, not the LORD as in the Psalm, is the shepherd – the good shepherd. The one who lays down his life for the sheep. Not the hired hand, who is not the shepherd, who doesn't own the sheep. That one sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

No, says Jesus. I'm not like that. A shepherd, yes. But a shepherd who is committed to ensuring the safety and security and wellbeing of the flock entrusted to him. The one who knows his sheep, and who in turn is known by his sheep. The one whose voice the sheep know. Good, rich, vivid imagery for our Lord and Saviour, and for our relationship with him by faith.

But the shepherd he likens himself to is not the kind of shepherd that we used to see in those dreadful, sentimental pictures in children's Bibles. He is not the kind of shepherd who stands in a pristine white robe, his large, soulful eyes turned heavenward, and with a cuddly, woolly lamb on his shoulders.

Jesus is talking about a shepherd who knows the dangers and hardships that are involved in shepherding, the very real dangers and hardships that were involved in shepherding in Jesus' time; a shepherd who knows the risks that a shepherd faces as an everyday reality; a shepherd who is willing to do whatever it takes to protect his sheep, even to the point of being willing to give up his life. Above all, a shepherd who knows and understands and cares for the flock entrusted to him.

In other words, a shepherd in whom we can place our trust, whatever life may throw at us, confident that we will be welcomed, cared for, protected and guided.