

April 22, 2018 4th Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:5-12, Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24

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John 10:11-18

Karoline Lewis in Dear Working Preacher on Working Preacher.org for 4/22/18. Joel LeMon on Psalm 23 in Working Preacher.org for 4/22/18. Nancy Blakely (quoting Barbara Brown Taylor quote by William Willimon) in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2, page 452.

Grace and peace to you, beloved creatures of our creator, our redeemer, our sustainer. Amen.

Our family traveled in Ireland and Scotland this past summer and some of my very favorite memories involve sheep.

Big sheep, little sheep, black and gray and white sheep, fluffy wooly sheep, just sheered practically naked sheep...the sheep we counted as our kids tried and tried to get into a regular sleep schedule.

Perhaps most mundane and also most vivid in my memory are the times we'd be driving along some country road, enjoying the fields blanketed in every possible tone of green grass,

only to come nose to nose with a sheep on the road or just about on the road,

doing it's sheep-thing, surely some sort of inborn contemplative spiritual practice.

What I didn't see in Ireland or Scotland, hardly ever, if ever, were shepherds—good, bad, or indifferent.

I saw no shepherds.

Many of the sheep I noticed had color coded paint markings splotched on their wool to allow the farmers to identify which sheep belong to which farm, to which shepherd, but I saw now shepherds.

We call this Good Shepherd Sunday, always the 4th Sunday of Easter.

Always a chance to hear again our beloved Psalm 23,

and always a snippet of reading from John's Gospel where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd."

When I say, Always, it's probably fair to get a little nervous.

There is a danger, you know, in a passage of scripture as well loved as Psalm 23 is to many of us.

We can recall how it moved us at a certain funeral, the lilt in each line, the way it is set to a beautiful musical arrangement, our tendency to sink into that special phrase that offers comfort.

To help us hear fresh the good news in a new way, I invite you into an **I wonder, I notice sermon**.

Between you and me, I've never tried this with a Psalm, but I've come to believe that it's a good way to hear one another reflect on such a meaningful passage, so let's live boldly.

We're all preachers this morning, engaging the scripture.

We've read the psalm once already and in a few minutes I'll read it again, slowly.

Your job is to interrupt me—and I mean it.

Interrupt using a phrase that begins either "I wonder... (whatever you wonder)" or "I notice..."

(10:30am: I'll repeat what you say so that it's amplified and all can hear it better.)

After that, another person may jump in with something they wonder or notice,
or I'll continue until I'm interrupted again.

So today it may sound like this, "The Lord is my shepherd..."

I notice that this line is in the present tense.

I wonder if I need a shepherd.

Remember, only two rules...

1. **There are no wrong answers**, let the Spirit (or should I say the Shepherd!) lead us as a community.
You may feel like you don't know enough, but really those can be the best interruptions.
Your job is to interrupt... It only works if you do.
2. **Use the structure. Begin your interruption with I wonder... or I notice...**

Ready? Are your voices ready? My name is Jen, what's your name? Are you ready for spring?

(READ)

Thank you!

Let me offer a few things I've been wondering and noticing.

First, I notice the way the psalm changes voices.

At first it is **The Lord is my shepherd**, then it becomes more personal, **You restore my soul**.

I notice that the shepherd guides and that we follow.

As I understand it, it was the cattle herding industry that made a big deal of sheep being no so smart,
for they observed how cattle are herded from behind,
but sheep must be shepherded from ahead, from the front.

In my life, I often feel God both behind and in front, and Christ's community at my side—grateful.

I wonder how this is for you.

I notice that in the 3rd verse, what we hear as right pathways, or paths of righteousness in some translations, was probably translated from a word that referred to ox-cart paths, as in wheeled ox-carts.

More than being nice paths in the woods, these pathways are probably more like deeply rutted tracks. As one scholar writes, "So, walking with Yahweh is finding your groove, and a righteous groove at that!" Finding your groove.

I wonder what it looks like, what it feels like, when you're in that groove, we are in that groove.

I notice that at the end, where the Psalm reads, goodness and mercy shall follow me, the word is probably actually not **follow me**, but **pursue me**, like an enemy pursues me. So the goodness and mercy pursue me, chase after me, all the days of my life.

I notice that the paths of righteousness don't lead simply through green pastures right to God's house. Rather the journey, these ruts, take us through the valley of the shadow of death. Of course, we'd like to avoid that valley, but if I'm going there, then I definitely want God as my shepherd.

I notice how the other readings today relate to this one:

I notice how in the Epistle from 1st John, we're called to love in action, in practice.

With Jesus as our shepherd, our good shepherd,

I wonder how we too take on shepherding roles, caring for each other, caring for the earth.

We know about Earth Day, but are you familiar Rogation Day?

It comes up on the 25th of April and then again in some weeks.

It's an ancient festival that dates from the 5th century.

Rogation means to ask (as in Interrogation) and we ask God's blessing for the seeds, the harvest, for the earth, for creation.

Like so often happened, an even older tradition called "beating the bounds" became part of rogation.

People would literally walk the bounds, the edges, of the parish or village, sort of tangible act of stewardship, shepherding the land and remembering our shepherding role.

It's in this spirit that I invite you to continue to meditate on this beloved Psalm, wondering and noticing the goodness of our shepherd.

The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not be in want.

Can I get an Amen? Amen!