

John 10:11-18

The theme for this Easter Season is one of transformation. You have heard me talk a lot about transformation...and fear...so what happens now that Jesus is no longer physically with us? How does one go on without Jesus right here in our lives.

That was the challenge facing the early disciples and the challenge we all face today. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. There's Jesus sitting under a tree, with a cute little lamb on his lap...or maybe draped across his shoulders. It's a beautiful image. It's a *safe* image. But it's a little incomplete. (Sometimes we are breathing in and sometimes we are breathing out and depending on where you are you will always receive my preaching differently depending on whether you are here to be commissioned to go out (the apostle posture) or whether you need rest and sanctuary (the disciple posture).

Today Jesus was not talking to His followers. He is addressing the Pharisees...the religious leaders...me! He tells them that He is the Good Shepherd, unlike the hired hands who would abandon the flock when things go wrong.

Now for thousands of years, the Jewish people had used the Shepherd image for God...Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David were all shepherds...they first learned how to lead sheep before they led people.

And the Pharisees knew *exactly* what Jesus meant...they were the hired hands looking out for God's people...but they seemed more interested in taking care of themselves and their own instead of their followers. Mmmm... The Pharisees came under a lot of criticism by Jesus. It wasn't that they were bad people...but they had lost sight of the kingdom of God which benefits all...its about me, me, me! Keep this quite but I've been told that can even happen in some governments and some churches.

In John's Gospel, Chapter 10 the metaphor for Jesus is that of a good shepherd...He cares for His flock and protects them. He loves them and he lays down his life for them. (Bulletin Cover Sheeps gate)

We see this lifestyle mirrored in the ancient shepherd caring for their flock. Their way of life placed them at the margins of society.

Their reality is far removed from the cuddly shepherd that we see in our minds.

And so it was with Jesus. Jesus lived a counter cultural lifestyle which took him away from safety, expressing by words and actions the grace of God for all peoples.

And rather than exalting the religious leaders, he was often to be found with the marginalized, telling them that they also have a place in God's flock. They also belonged...they also mattered! And that He would lay down His life for them too.

(Look at your bulletin cover – Describe a sheep gate)

Today we read Psalm 23 ...which is attributed to David a simple shepherd...tending his father's sheep when God sent Samuel to anoint him as King over all of Israel.

See to be a GOOD shepherd took a very special heart. Tough and disciplined, but also full of compassion. A shepherd would spend a lot of time alone...a lot of time to think and draw closer to God.

And every verse of Psalm 23 testifies to a truth about God and the relationship David had with Him. David paints with words, a picture of God as the Great Shepherd of his life. What David was to his sheep, he considered the Lord to be for him!

The 23rd psalm is the most beloved of Psalms. It is a shame that we only hear it at funerals. So I want to spend a little time unpacking this. First off Psalm 23 is a psalm for the living...it is a psalm that applies to our lives every day.

Notice immediately David refers to God as "**He**" Then in verses 4 and 5, David switches tense and refers to God as "**You**". It's funny how you can't talk very long about God without then actually talking **to** God.

The first line, "**The Lord is my shepherd**", is a phrase so familiar that we probably are missing the magnitude here. David is saying that the eternal God of the Universe is his personal shepherd. "**The Lord is MY shepherd**".

You see Christianity is not so much a religion as it is also about having a very close relationship and connection **with** God.

Then there are these green pastures... and you might think they are blessings of the Shepherd, but they're not. The green pastures eventually give way to "**walking through the valley of the shadow of death**". The constant in this psalm is not the green pastures...they are temporary. Nor is it the valley of the shadow of death...David says we eventually walk "**through**" that too! These relate to our circumstances...They come and go...the only constant in Psalm 23 is the very presence of God WITH US in both situations...good and bad!

The blessing of the Shepherd is not an elimination of our problems.

The Psalm portrays life as a journey...it is a pilgrimage WITH God...TO God...ending IN God...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!

There's a whole lot of relevant and practical wisdom throughout this Psalm.

Let's just take verse 2 and 3 for some practical ways to live our lives right now.

TAKE THE JAR OF WATER!

God leads me besides still water...the Hebrew words here meant peaceful, harmonious, still, deep water...and it is here that God revives my soul!

Take a look at this water...look at it when I shake it and when it is calm and still...how would you describe the state of your soul today...this kind of water... or this...some of us may probably need more jars...

God takes this and makes it like this. He connects this water to our soul...and to a Middle Eastern shepherd still water would be very, very rare indeed. In that area of the world, you get either quickly evaporating water or flash floods! And the nomads and shepherds knew exactly where the still water was to be found.

God wants to take this (shake) and restore it to this (still)...could some of you use some of this now...could our world need some calm still peaceful water about now?

I don't think anyone would argue with me when I say that we in this country have a problem with soul depletion. There's too much going on!!! Not enough time to just be still...

The Lord wants to revive our souls. Maybe you're here today and you feel that spiritual dryness. And you can't really explain it...well what you are dealing with is this NEED to have your soul revived! So how do I get me some of that?

First let's talk about that word that is translated "revive". The word literally means replenishes. To return to its original state. Like when you refill your tank with gasoline.

God keeps me going. God refills my tank with vitality, energy, and enthusiasm for living. God revives my soul!

Soul...That's also a very important word in the Bible, 755 times in the Old Testament the Hebrew word Nephesh is translated as soul, heart, life, or mind. And all the time it's that same word "nephesh" ...and it literally means the act of BREATHING...To Breathe.

Nephesh, the ability to bring in and breathe out air. Perhaps we can say it this way...God restores my soul; God refreshes my life. God resets me! God returns me to my breathing!!!

So are we talking about a spiritual mystery here... or your actual breathing? For many folks these are different things, especially here in Western thought - but for the ancient Hebrew there was no such distinction. They were all the same thing!

A person is an integrated holistic being...in today's world we tend to separate things out.

We ask: how's your spiritual life going...and how is this different from your job, your families, cheeseburgers, and everything else? As if these are all separate zones...these categories are unfamiliar to the scriptures.

Now what's interesting is that There is NO Hebrew word for spiritual...because that would mean that other things aren't spiritual... for the psalmist, all of life is an integrated reality...everything is spiritual...God gives life to all of me!

There are very practical implications here! Just begin by breathing - Nephesh!!!
breathing slowly and deeply from your abdomen - not your chest...

We American's breath 16 to 20 breathes per minute, yet we are optimally built to breathe only 6 times per minute. Our bodies are designed to gain 80-90% of it's energy through breathing. Our current breathing habits only account for us accessing 10-20% of this energy!

To what degree does the stillness of our soul connect to something as simple as breathing...what do all religious traditions begin with...breathing, prayer, meditation...what is the human reset button...breathing! It's how we were created and designed to function.

By breathing correctly your entire body and mind become still, to include your heartbeat (which actually mirrors your breathes' rhythm).

When you find yourself with disruptive waters can you still the water if your body is out of whack? For many of us we don't equate our physical wellbeing with the state of our heart and soul...again we separate them out.

So when we eat the wrong things and don't get enough fresh air and water, and when we don't exercise or get enough sleep...sitting alone with our bibles and believing everything will be alright denies how we were created to be.

How does God revive and restore your soul? Simply start by breathing. When people are in medical crisis, first responders first tell the patient to breath...ask someone giving birth how important breathing is...

Once you begin to breath, you become still, and in a still state you can begin to separate yourself out from your circumstances...you can actually observe yourself.

After you get good at it, you soon realize that the person doing the observing is really you and that the circumstances you are witnessing, the turbulent water, is just passing through.

When your stressing, anxious ... it feels like YOU...it's like you are in the jar and your shaking as well...you become your anger, you become your stress...it consumes you! Now what David was saying...is that you will have green pastures, but you will also walk through shadows...

God doesn't promise sunshine all the time, what God promises is His presence with you...so when you are feeling caught up in your own turbulence you must detach yourself from it...stand apart from it – incidentally, that's what the word Holy in Hebrew means – Kadosh...to stand apart...observe it for what it is...a passing thing...see and know that...THAT is not you...that's just something you are experiencing right now... that is how God sees us...for who we truly are...not by what circumstances we are experiencing at the moment...(Imagine you're watching a movie about you...you are outside the movie...and who is watching you watch the movie?)

Eventually we come to KNOW the truth – that at some level, these experiences are temporary and passing in a way that YOU are not...in reality something about the water is changing but something about YOU remains constant.

The early Christians would say it like this. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but that Christ lives in me. You see, there is a grounded centered reality you find in Christ that transcends the part of you that gets offended, bothered, and perturbed. There is a part of you that lives in Christ...your true self... and it is unshakeable!

So folks can say what they want, throw stones, shoot arrows, and you will simply observe it and acknowledge it. Because that stuff is not you, it does not own you... because YOU belong to Christ, and you will come through whatever it is.

See you are extracting the emotion, the tension, the drama of it... and you are placing it in its proper context... you are being reminded of who you are... the true you... the enduring you... the you that is a new creation in Christ.

The mystics, saints, desert fathers and mothers through contemplative prayer taught themselves this discipline of reminding themselves that this thing (shake the water)...I can give it what it needs, I can pay attention to it, I can work to resolve it, but I am not confused as to whether this thing is me. I have a reality that goes on and transcends my circumstances!

And simply by breathing... and by detached observation you can radically transform your life right now.

See we become seduced (sometimes even by religion) that tells us...Oh you have some turbulent waters...here's step one, step two...you need this pill...you need to purchase this... and what that tells you is that what you desperately need is something or somewhere else. But what David is telling us is that it's the Good Shepherd that revives my soul...and that everything I need is right here with me.

We may have frustration, anxiety, fear, stress, busyness...and Jesus invites us into that stillness...that peace the world can never give us. So invite God to revive your soul! Breathe... Observe...and trust that our Good Shepherd is always right here with us...

“The Lord is MY shepherd.” To utter these words is to trust that within and beyond our sometimes-scary world, there exists a loving, benevolent presence—someone who cares deeply about you. Psalms 23 is deeply personal. It is about a personal relationship with the living God: “The Lord is *MY* shepherd”

When we recite this psalm in times of trouble or uncertainty, we invoke within ourselves - TRUST. God does not promise an easy ride, a safe passage, or a trouble-free life; But what God does promise is to be right there with us!

So may God revive your souls! And may you all come to know that Jesus truly **IS** *YOUR* Good Shepherd...

Your faithful servant, carmen