

Good Shepherd Sunday 2019

Scriptures

Num 27:12-23

Ps 100

Rev 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

Opening

Living in a globalized, smartphone, social media age of distraction as we do, I find it remarkable that one of the most enduring and beloved images of Jesus is a shepherd. If you met a man for the first time at a social gathering and asked him what he does for a living, you might well drop your glass if he said, 'I'm a shepherd.' If his answer did *not* shock you, you might not believe he tended actual sheep, instead thinking him an obnoxious pastor, trying to preach a mini-sermon about his calling. Well, if you've ever met an actual shepherd whose daily work means herding actual sheep and, from time to time, shearing actual wool, then you are a great exception in our time.

Which makes it all the more exceptional that we respond so deeply to this name for Jesus—the Good Shepherd. How does the most beloved psalm of all time begin? 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures.' When we gathered around my father's bedside three weeks ago on Easter Sunday morning, we had two Scripture readings before we shared Holy Communion. The Easter story from John's Gospel and the 23rd Psalm.

We pray the psalm of the Good Shepherd at bedsides and gravesides. We read Psalm 23 in times of agony, when tears fill our eyes, when we don't have words of our own to pray. We will never outgrow, never progress, never 'mature' to a place where we no longer need the Good Shepherd. Well, thanks be to God for that. For we always and forever will be his people *and the sheep of his pasture.*

And thanks be to God we will always at least have an entire Sunday each year to meditate on Christ the Good Shepherd. The Church could have placed Good Shepherd on any old Sunday, but in her wisdom she didn't. On this day when we also celebrate the virtues of mothers in our lives, we can also be grateful for the wisdom of our Mother, the Church. Theoretically, she could have observed Good Shepherd Sunday in Ordinary Time on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, but that just doesn't seem wise. Somehow we need to gaze on Christ the Good Shepherd in our most

joyful season of the Christian year: Eastertide. There is something about the life and story of the Good Shepherd that belongs in the season of resurrection.

Yes, in her wisdom the Church gives us Good Shepherd in this resurrection season, a mere eighteen days before another major Eastertide event, the Ascension of Jesus. We have Good Shepherd Sunday in the middle of Eastertide so we'll see that it is the Good Shepherd who ascends into the heavens and reigns at the right hand of the Father.

That's how the story ends, you see. The Good Shepherd is enthroned, but he's enthroned as a Lamb. The Lamb is our shepherd. Try to work that one out. Not even a full grown sheep, but the meekest one of the flock will reign.

Well, that could be an entirely different sermon and you might find it helpful if I preach one sermon, not two. And the sermon I want to preach is simply this: finding the Good Shepherd enthroned at the end of the story makes sense of the *whole* story. And it makes our whole story good and true and beautiful.

This is not some cute metaphor. It is not an idea so we can find comfort in difficult times. It's so much more. This is our story. God becoming the Good Shepherd, delivering us from all predators of death, leading us to safe pastures to dwell with him—this *has been* our story; it *is* our story now; and it is our future story. And that's why, following Bishop Frank's lead from last week, I'll have us live inside the Book of Revelation for a second consecutive Sunday. Please return with me to Revelation on page () of your pew Bible.

How to Read Revelation

If you decided to study the theme of the Good Shepherd throughout Scripture, the last place you might look would be the Book of Revelation. But if you want to see the 'through-line,' the recurring motif of God shepherding his people, Revelation might be the best place to *begin* your study.

Let's take a brief excursion on how to read Revelation and then we'll return to the theme of the Good Shepherd. If you want to **misread** the Book of Revelation, just ignore the entire Old Testament. When someone goes off to Crazytown preaching, teaching, or talking about Revelation, it's usually because they ignored the Old Testament in John's Apocalypse.

If you want to read Revelation in a faithful way, read it like John wrote it. Yes, John wrote down all that he saw when he was lifted up into heaven on the Lord's day, but he also wrote what was *inside* him. And what was inside him was the whole story of Israel in the Old Testament and the eyewitness Gospel stories of Jesus. Revelation was written by two authors—God the Holy Spirit

and John the Apostle. And what was inside the human author, John the Apostle, a first century Jewish man, was a whole 'stock of images' and stories from Israel's past, as Austin Farrer says.

There are more than 500 direct or indirect references to the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation. The Gospel of Matthew—the Gospel which emphasizes that Jesus has fulfilled Israel's story in the Old Testament—has *half* the number of Old Testament references that John includes in Revelation. Through allusions, echoes, and direct references to Old Testament passages, John tells us, 'Jesus hasn't only *fulfilled* Israel's story. He's transfigured this story in unimaginable ways! Let me show you how Jesus transfigures the old story in ways no one imagined.'

If we can imagine John holding the Old Testament in one hand, keeping his eyes fixed on the heavenly vision, then writing down the whole story transfigured in Jesus, then Revelation opens up for us.

Palm Trees and a Shelter in the Wilderness

So let's return with that perspective to Revelation 7. We enter the scene of the heavenly throne room, seeing a numberless multitude of saints from every tribe, tongue, and nation. They are standing before the throne, wearing white robes, and they hold palm branches in their hands.

Four Sundays ago we placed palm branches in your hand to begin Holy Week. Almost ten Sundays ago we imposed the ashes of burned palm branches on your forehead to begin the season of Lent. Perhaps we ought to distribute palm branches on Good Shepherd Sunday, too. For palm branches have long been a sign that God will shepherd his people, *even before the birth of Jesus Christ*.

Palm branches are not only signs of a King of peace processing in triumph, they find their original meaning in the Exodus. The Father looked upon his people, Israel, suffering helplessly in the house of Egypt under the merciless cruelty of Pharaoh. In the Passover, he brought his people out of Egypt and led them to the edge of the Red Sea. With Pharaoh's chariots bearing down on the helpless sheep of Israel at the shoreline of the Red Sea, God the Father delivered the people of his pasture from the assaults of their enemies. Centuries before David prayed, 'yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,' Israel walked through a valley of death when the Red Sea split in two. But she was not drowned and she did not die. Instead her enemies were swallowed up in the deep. Because God has always been a good shepherd, delivering his people from evil, leading them to safe pastures.

Shortly after Israel's deliverance from Egypt, God brought his people into safety at a wilderness place called Elim. The Good Shepherd was leading them onward to the Promised Land, but it was not a short distance away. But Elim was a resting place *on the way* to the Promised Land.

What did Israel find at Elim? Seventy palm trees and twelve springs of water. ¹Even when you haven't reached home, the Good Shepherd still leads you to fresh water; he gives you shelter and revives you in the wilderness.

God commanded that Israel always remember that moment—not just the Passover, but that moment of rest and shelter and refreshment *after* he delivered them from their enemies. And most of all, God wanted to impress upon his people that he tabernacled among them—he dwelled alongside them in wilderness days. So the Lord commanded an annual feast remembering this event. It would be called the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths.

When the Feast of Tabernacles-Booths came round, Israel had to make little booths, temporary shelters for themselves, and dwell in them for seven days. Call it liturgical camping. How did they make these booths? With palm branches.

But remember the twelve springs at Elim too, where God provided for his people's thirst in the wilderness. Israel remembered that event during the Feast of Booths-Tabernacles too. When the feast was celebrated in Jerusalem, the priest had a specific job on day 7, the last day of the feast. He would draw water from a nearby pool, the pool of Siloam, then carry it to the altar of God in solemn procession, and pour the water on the altar.

But those rituals were always shadows awaiting fulfillment. Perhaps you remember that it was on this day—the last day of the feast—that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, stood up in Jerusalem and shouted out, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' ²Our Lord was fulfilling the whole purpose of the feast in himself. Because the Good Shepherd is always leading us onward to safe pastures where we will never hunger nor thirst.

The Lamb Enthroned

You see John has these stock of stories from Israel, from eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ—his ministry, his death, and his resurrection—when he wrote his vision of the last things.

John looks upon the saints from every tribe and tongue and nation who have suffered new persecutions from new Pharaohs and he sees, not a fulfillment of the old Feast of Tabernacles, but a transfiguration, a rebirth of all those symbols in Jesus Christ.

As the saints have suffered new persecutions in new Egypts from new pharaohs, John shows us a shelter for those saints beneath the throne of God. There will they dwell secure in his presence.

¹ Exodus 15.27

² [John 7.37-38](#)

And because He is their shelter and their deliverer, all John hears around the throne is the liturgy of adoration from the saints: 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb!'

A Temporary Shelter Before the New Creation

What does it all mean? It means that from beginning to end God will be our Good Shepherd, delivering us from evil, leading us to safe pastures. It's not just a nice metaphor; it's our history, our present reality, our eternal future. We may suffer for a while from brutal taskmasters, whether they be visible or invisible. For the unseen pharaohs of our inner lives are just as cruel as any real authority figures who abuse our lives. But just as God established a limit to Pharaoh's rule, so also all assaults of our enemies, visible and invisible, have a limit to their harassment.

Who establishes that limit? The Lamb. The meekest one of the flock. But he is the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world, who rules and reigns over all principalities and powers. The Lamb who conquers all evil shelters his people and takes care of their every need.

"Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

He is the eternal Tabernacle. He is the Feast of Tabernacles transfigured. Springs of living water for all who are thirsty, who pant from the exhaustion of too many desert days. After all the arid seasons of our lives, or even if all the years of our lives were like a wilderness, there is a sheltering presence around the Good Shepherd's throne. He looks with special compassion on those who have suffered for his name's sake. He knows their weariness, but he restores their souls, too. He leads them onward to the Promised Land, to his new creation, his new Jerusalem, where they may rest and feast forevermore. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.