

The Good Shepherd

Readings

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.



The Good Shepherd.

Anne C. Brink. For more details
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1 John 3:16-24

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

John 10:11-18

¹¹ 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

Hear what God's Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God

Reflection

We pray...

God of Love, we turn ourselves today to the Good Shepherd as our inspiration and model for the sacrificial love for one another to which we are called. Fill us with the power of your name and embolden us in our acts of love. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Easter 4, 25 April 2021, p.142

Today's readings, grouped as they are around the theme of the Good Shepherd, invite us to think about what it means for us to respond to God as our shepherd. It is not an easy image for many of us, although probably a little bit easier here in Jamberoo, as there are some sheep in the fields amongst the dairy and beef cattle. Even so, modern sheep farming is a little different to the kind of herding the psalmist and Jesus were referring to.

As familiar as these passages are to us, or as much as we think we know what this image of shepherding means, there is something to be said for pausing once more over these texts to ponder. In particular, I want to encourage you to spend some time with Psalm 23 - as familiar as it is - and to allow it to soak in again.

I want to invite you to take it out of its familiar context. We often hear this psalm (and sing it) at funerals. But this psalm is not about death, it is about life! This psalm points us to God who is with us always, not just at the point of death, but throughout our whole lives, in the darkest, most challenging times and in the abundant and joyful times.

The psalm invites us to stop and give thanks for the times we have enjoyed peace and abundance. And, when life is tough, it invites us to allow God's embrace and reassurance that God is with us - always.

The Hebrew scholars tell us that in the Hebrew version of the psalm, that just as the language of the psalm shifts from third person, "The Lord is my shepherd", to first person "you", the words "for you are with me" (23:4) are right in the centre of the psalm (there are 26 words before and after). Remember, psalms are poetry and so sometimes the structure of the psalm lends itself to meaning - here, "for you are with me" is the central message. God is with us - always - in the stillness, in the depths of despair, and in the abundance.

Jesus echoes this in John 10:14: "I know my own and my own know me". God is not only with us, but we are intimately known and loved by God.

There are three other things I want to invite you to ponder about this psalm
Verse 3 says that God “restores my soul”. The Hebrew word translated there as “soul” means *life* or *life-force*. So it is not only a spiritual thing making us feel better about ourselves, but it is a restoration of life - a returning to life in its fulness as Jesus speaks about.

In verse 6 - surely goodness and mercy will “follow” me all the days of my life. The word that is translated for us as “follow”, in the Hebrew, has the sense more like being pursued. It is used in the sense of being hunted down - so it reminds us again that God’s grace has very little to do with us and is all about God - God pursuing us with mercy and goodness, chasing us down, persistently on our tail, waiting for us to stop long enough, to return to God, to enable God’s grace to wash over us and for us to know what it is to live our lives in the presence of God - always.

Which brings me to the last comment in verse 6: “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long” (or forever).

There is no doubt that in its original context, this is referring to a return to the temple.

Throughout the psalm, the psalmist is speaking of God being present throughout all of life’s turning - the good and the challenging - but there is always this sense of returning to the temple, the place of praise and prayer that centred and grounded the people of Israel.

Today, we sometimes think of this passage as referring to somewhere we go after we die. I think it is better understood in the sense of God’s presence being with us always - we dwell in God’s presence, as 1 John 3:24 says, we “abide in God”. And we will explore that theme much more deeply over the coming weeks...

We pray...

Shepherd us, Holy One.

Companion us through darkness and distress,
through chaos and fear,
through upheaval and uncertainty,
through life and death.

Shepherd us, Father and Mother of Mercy.

Still the roiling waters of our worry and concern,
and lead us to rest and relaxation.

Nurture us with the Bread of Life
and the Cup of Salvation.

Shepherd us, Sacred Presence.

Restore in us trust and hope, openness and goodwill,
that we may in turn offer
kindness and mercy, love and grace,
not just in words, but in concrete ways.

Shepherd us, Author of Life,
that we may shepherd others.

Prayer from Kathy Swaar – Prayer for Easter 4 – B
Based on Psalm 23 | John 3:16-24 | John 10:11-18

A short comment and prayer for Anzac Day...

As we come to our prayer for others, let's think about what it means to lay down our lives for another. In our readings, we heard that phrase several times, and it is one we readily link to our ANZAC Day remembrances.

1 John 3:16:

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

John 10:11,15,17-18:

¹¹ 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I lay down my life for the sheep... ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

The difficulty I have is that so often we link these verses with the idea of “sacrifice” which, in the ancient world, had a very particular understanding which involved the shedding of blood and usually life, animal or human, to satisfy a debt of some kind. But this connection is not made in these texts, rather it is about laying down life, the things we want to do, our own comfort, for the sake of caring for others, for the sake of attending to another in need (1 John 3:17). Jesus' comment about laying his life down for the sheep is to protect them.

And while we know that war is a reality in our world, and we rightly recognise the tragic cost of war, I want to suggest that the life of Jesus points us to finding non-violent ways of resolving our differences.

And the readings today invite us to attend to the needs of our brothers and sisters and to attend to that need, not closing our eyes, not walking away because we don't want to get involved, not worrying about what other people will say - attending to need, even when it costs us or means that we don't get to do something we wanted or planned to do, even when it means our well-prepared plans for the day get thrown out the window...

A Prayer for ANZAC Day

You might like to hold a piece of rosemary as we pray...

Gracious God,

On this Anzac Day, we bring before you all those who have and continue to serve in our Defence Forces.

We remember and give thanks for their service to our country.

We pray for all those who suffer in war and continue to suffer from the trauma of war. We pray for comfort in their grief. We pray for supportive communities to journey with them in their struggles, healing and recovery.

We give thanks for all our Defence Force chaplains.

We thank you for their response to your call to offer spiritual leadership and pastoral care to Defence Force personnel and their families.

We pray for all those who are negotiating for peace in situations of war and conflict throughout our world. Bless them with wisdom, strength and resolve to find ways we can live together in harmony and respect for one another.

We pray that we might be bearers of your peace.

Through Christ, who is our Peace, we pray.

Amen.

Dr Deidre Palmer, President, Uniting Church in Australia
<https://uniting.church/anzac-day-2021/>

Rev Kath Merrifield
25 April 2021