

Calvary Presbyterian Church
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John 10: 11-18 and Psalm 23

How do we speak of things? What kind of language do we draw on? Metaphor theorists have in recent years drawn attention to the fact that we regularly employ expressions that are drawn from some other realm in order to express something, that “straightforward language” is not as straightforward as we once conceived. That metaphor, ways of drawing on one thing to say something about another, is an integral part of the way we speak about things, feelings, experiences. We draw on the figurative to express basic things. For example, we may speak of our mind running, heart racing, the doctor may even suggest someone’s breathing is shallow. One’s nerves can sting. Hearts can leap. Time may drag. You may feel up, or you may feel down, or may be in the dumps. If you said any of these things, we would know what you are talking about, even though hearts don’t literally race, or minds run, or time drag.

How do we speak of things? And not just everyday ways of feeling or thinking, but how do we speak about the ineffable, or the indescribable, that is those things or emotions that are “too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words.” Romans 11:33 writes, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! How do we speak of and understand the divine, God’s love, God’s hopes, God’s grief over broken humanity, God’s persistent love? These are things that are hard to comprehend and even harder to convey through the limited capacity of words. And so, we inevitably rely on and draw upon the way imagery and metaphor can suggest, can open up more than words on their own can convey straightforwardly.

Psalm 23 praises God through the metaphor of the shepherd. It is a common metaphor. A king or a leader was often termed a shepherd, and their people their flock. But this expresses the relationship particularly intimately and closely. It is an expression of God’s goodness and kindness, but it expresses God’s nature in relationship to us, not as God is in some removed, way up in the sky, metaphysical kind of way. It expresses who God is as we know God in relationship.

The psalmist expresses that in a world of many who claim to be leaders and shepherds, the Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is a shepherd who cares for his flock. Now key to the imagery here is the fact that shepherding in the Middle East typically happens in arid and rugged territory, it is not really the green pastoral rolling landscapes we typically conjure. Google images of a Middle Eastern wadi

to get a sense of the landscape being conjured here. It is a dry and rather harsh environment, vegetation and water only in certain areas, lots of lies for predators. So the shepherd is to be skilled and knowledgeable and caring, to protect his flock from falling or getting injured or taken by a predator, or wandering away from the flock. The shepherd has to know how to find water and vegetation in these arid environments. The good shepherd knows how to provide these things, and the psalm suggests that the sheep can rest in that knowledge.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
 he restores my soul/nepesh.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.
 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.

The “soul” as translated here is actually the *nepesh*, or throat. It is a way of representing the self through the concrete image of the throat. It represents the vulnerable self, and is the seat of longing and desire. The sheep's throat is refreshed in a dry place. The psalmist's longing and desires and yearning are satiated, are satisfied by the Shepherd.

The imagery draws upon things the psalmist's listeners might be familiar with, and upon experiences that we might be able to relate to— like caring for children, or for a pet, or a parent. Leading them and caring for them in ways that meet their needs, and avoid pitfalls, and satisfies their souls and yearnings, because we care, because we know their vulnerabilities. Drawing on these experiences evokes a sense of love and tenderness.

John, the gospel writer, draws on such experiences as well to say that Jesus is the good Shepherd who knows the sheep. They are not just a flock of random sheep, but they have become individuals, whose personalities and emotions matter. He knows them, and they know his voice.

This way of speaking about God's love draws upon the imagery of a shepherd, draws upon experiences that we might have had or be familiar with. But then the imagery is extended in ways that are not as anticipated, to say something more

about God's love. This is true both in Psalm 23 and in our gospel reading where the image keeps getting turned to say something more about this shepherd relationship.

In Psalm 23 the imagery shifts in verse 5. The metaphor shifts from the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep, to the shepherd and the guest who comes to his tent for help. This again is drawing upon the arid landscapes and a shepherd culture, that is a tent culture, a semi-nomadic experience. It evokes someone who is out in the arid regions, apart from resources and other relationships, and they come upon a tent encampment. And like a guest, we come to the tent. Unlike the sheep, who is passive, the guest chooses to come for help. And in context of tent hospitality, relationships are formed, associations are sealed, a type of covenant is enacted. It is about the relationship. The relationship becomes the focus. Because in an inhospitable environment, one relies upon relationship, and friends.

In verses 5-6, we are invited as guests in the Shepherd's tent, into the gestures and covenants formed there. You see, tent hospitality is a formalized set of back and forth gestures that show honor to one another, and which bring you into close contact, and to mutual responsibility for one another. Yes, to be a guest in the tent is not just about receiving; you form a bond and a covenant in which you become bound to honor all the days of your life going forward.

In this sense, the psalmist is not extending the imagery beyond what one might have known or experienced, but the psalmist is associating the relationship between a worshipper and their God in a non-conventional way. We are not just sheep, we are now friends, welcomed into the tent.

Tent hospitality in a process of approaching the tent, removing your shoes, being invited in, the host rubbing oil on your neck, washing your feet. It is an intimate moment. Next is tea, warm hot tea to restore that dry quenched thirst, that dry parched throat. Then the finjam, which is strong coffee. Three cups, each a third full. Coffee is expensive and harder to come by. Each step slow and methodical; a formalized series of back and forth gestures meant to bring the two together.

In Bedouin tradition, after the coffee, the son goes to the tent flap and draws his sword – a symbol that this guest is under the protection of this house/tent; the host's sons are pledged for the guest's safety, not just while in the tent, but going forth based on the relationship formed within the tent. You can call on this household. You come under the protection of this tent.

Then comes the meal and salt-sharing – the salt being the symbol of forgiveness or reconciliation – if there is any bad feelings between these parties it is forgiven and resolved in the sharing of the salt. The meal is shared, and with it the ancestral stories are shared; the stories that tell you what this family is about, what this host is like.

So when the psalmist says, “you prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies; / you anoint my head with oil; / my cup overflows,” we are guests in the shepherd’s tent. The metaphor deepens in such a way as to convey something of what it might mean for the Lord to care for us, not as a typical king, or ruler who also wore the title of shepherd, not as a typical ancient deity. No, this God treats us as guests, as honored guests worthy of God’s love and relationship and protection. As guests who look eye to eye with the shepherd, who exchange words of affection and promise. And in the covenant and intimacy of the bonds formed reclining at that table, our journeys through dry and arid places take on greater hope, joy, comfort – “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me / all the days of my life.”

And the psalmist’s response is one of gratitude and relationship. I will continually return to that tent, my whole life long. Now the word usually translated “dwell,” I’ve translated “return.” Because these verbs are sometimes confused, and because one does not dwell in the shepherd’s tent. You, as a guest, stay three days. But you return in confidence of the relationship. And as God’s tent often refers figuratively to the temple as well, you don’t live in the temple, but as a grateful worshipper, you continually return to it.

Metaphor. Imagery drawn from the everyday world to try to express the ineffable—that which is “too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words.”

Our gospel picks up this imagery, and extends it in his own ways. One of the ways John tries to speak about Jesus, is that Jesus is not like the hired hand. Now it seems to me that the way John portrays the hired hand, the hired hand is not really bad at their role, they are operating according to reasonable expectations. No one expects the hired hand to get themselves killed trying to defend one sheep, because if you do, who is going to take care of the rest? But Jesus is not like such a shepherd. Jesus is not like this hired hand who does what is reasonable. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ... and I lay down my life for the sheep. This shepherd’s heart and care is not content with letting any go, nor, furthermore, is he content with the flock before him. “I 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.”

This shepherding imagery is invoked both by the psalmist and the gospel writer to convey something about God's love, about Christ's sacrificial passion, about Christ's heart that will not be satisfied until all the sheep are safely in the fold.

But the imagery in both cases is extended in such a way to suggest what a faithful and grateful response to such great love might look like.

In the imagery of the Shepherd and his guest, the one who is hosted takes on a responsibility. For the guest is a part of the promises and commitments made – to honor this house, this host; to be faithful and to do right by him and his family. As those whom the shepherd has loved, we are changed because of it. To experience such profound love calls for response. The response that the psalmist promises is to continue to worship in the temple; to journey to God's house and offer sacrifices of praise and testimony to God's goodness. This is one response to such profound love.

But Jesus speaks of the response called for as well, in the NT. It is to feed the sheep; to take on the role of shepherd ourselves – to care for the church, not those already in the church only, but for those needing shepherding, those not yet in the flock but whom Jesus desires to be in the flock. It is to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to extend hospitality to those who sojourn. It is to love others as Christ has loved us. It is to feed the sheep.

To borrow the psalmist language of Psalm 103, "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love." We grasp for the imagery and the words to express this love God has for us, this relationship God calls us into, and this calling God places upon us as his beloved children and followers. And in that pursuit to comprehend and to respond, God expresses his grace and care to us as a shepherd and a friend.

God is to us like a good shepherd, and we are forever changed.

Psalm 23

The Divine Shepherd

A Psalm of David.

- 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.

John 10: 11-18

¹⁰ “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

¹² The 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. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I 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. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No 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.”