

## The Lord's My Shepherd

Lent 4 A

*The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want. He makes me down to lie in pastures green; He leadeth me, the quiet waters by....*

For thirty years I have enjoyed listening to Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*, Saturday evenings on public radio. A fictional sponsor of the show is Powder Milk Biscuits which give shy persons the strength to do what needs to be done. Keillor caricatures the Norwegian Lutheran bachelor farmers of his fictional home, Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, as shy, retiring people. When these guys talk to you, they look down at their shoes, instead of looking you in the eye. An especially outgoing Norwegian Lutheran bachelor farmer might go so far as to look at your shoes while talking to you.

The familiar Shepherd Psalm is beloved because it seems to speak to those of us who sometimes feel sheepish and shy. We love it because we all feel vulnerable at times, times when we feel insecure and in need of the protection of a gentle but strong shepherd. We are comforted by the pastoral image of the green pastures, still waters and the promise, central to this psalm and to the gospel's understanding of all scripture, that God is with us, especially through the valley of the shadow of death.

In an old Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown is asked what "security" means. He describes the experience of riding in the back seat, while your parents are in the front seat, driving. You can sleep worry-free, because they're taking care of everything, Charlie Brown explains to Peppermint Patty. That might be another way to describe the feeling of utter trust and security provided by a reliable, loving, powerful figure, like the shepherd if you are a lamb, and like God to those of us gathered in the flock known as a congregation. (Of course, Charlie Brown ends with the gripping realization that the day inevitably comes when "you grow up and can never ride in the backseat again." But that's another sermon.)

I have powerful memories of the backseat in my folks' 1951 Studebaker (bullet-nosed) Champion. It was always late and dark when we left my grandparents home in New London (Iowa) and drove the twenty miles to our farm home near Burlington. I would curl up on the back seat and hear the hum of the rolling wheels, the tire treads singing on the pavement of highway 34; I would only sort of hear my parents talking quietly in the front seat, as the Studebaker gently rocked me to sleep. I would be out like a light before we passed the grain elevator at the edge of town, and New London was a small town. Then there would be that

dreamlike time in the garage at home, when my folks would try to wake me up and say that I was too big to be carried into the house. I was maybe three or four years old, though if my sister were here she would tell you I was eleven or twelve. Why do I remember that so clearly? It is the image of a secure childhood, of feeling safe and protected and cared for and brought along with no worries about road hazards, or whether there was enough gasoline in the tank, or what it meant that the steering wheel pulled a bit too hard to the right or that there was an unusual noise coming from under the bullet-nosed hood. I had no experience of whatever was wrong with Grandma Helt, who sat mute on her sofa, while Grandpa tried to entertain us by turning on the black and white TV. The only time I recall my grandfather acting foolish was when he would stand up from his rocking chair during a commercial and imitate the signature, slack-armed walk of Jack Benny.

As I slept in the back seat on the way home, my folks no doubt talked about how Grandma was doing and what would become of Grandpa when she was no longer with us. But I had no such grown up cares, no responsibilities, no worries, no concerns other than that rocking, humming, soft, warm, dark back seat.

Isn't that why we love the Shepherd Psalm? We are young again, protected, secure. We are sheep with no worries, no frets, no adult responsibilities, no expectations or concerns other than our own comfort. I always recite the psalm with those who are dying. We said the words together with Betty and her family as her mother was dying just last month. We said them again soon after Delmer passed away the following week. The words are a comfort, perhaps the most comforting words that we know from the Bible.

There are two basic types of psalms. One type is the lament, like the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, which Jesus quotes from the cross: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Psalms of lament always involve tears, crying out from a bad situation. The other type of psalm is the celebration. These psalms always have music or food. We make a joyful noise to the Lord with our music. Today's psalm of celebration has a festive banquet table spread before us: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

Here is another picture of security. A table for me in the presence of my enemies? Oil anointing? An overflowing cup? These are royal privileges offered to those who can afford a banquet prepared just for them and who fear no one. That's a picture of security. (Even better than the backseat of a Studebaker to a sleepy child!) Reason to celebrate! You know who gets their head anointed with oil. The Messiah, the Christ, the King, these are the anointed ones who have oil on their heads when they are crowned.

We love this psalm of celebration because all of us sometimes feel powerless, not so royal. Of course it is fine to be powerless in the backseat of a Studebaker, rocked to sleep by the road noise in the darkness of our vulnerable youth. But when we have come of age, power can be one of our many adult problems. We have no real expectations about power when we are children, even though we may pretend to be super heroes. But when we have given up childish things, when we have seen ourselves in the mirror face to face as grown ups, as Paul says, the question of power is always a part of the daily equation.

We need power to live as adults. That's what the budget battles are about in Madison and Washington and Cairo and Tripoli and Damascus and on and on. Power is what the conversations in the front seat are about. Unions exist because of power imbalances between owners and workers. Our governor is trying to make the most of his powers as our state's chief executive. Spouses may quibble about childrearing or balancing home and job or finances or house repair or spending priorities. But those are just the fine points of the big blunt instrument of power. Who has the power and how are they handling it?

Adolescents are those who are caught between the security of childhood and the imagined power of adulthood, somewhere between the back seat and the front. Part of middle age and its "crisis" for most of us is learning that we will never have the power that we dreamed we would have when we were younger. Getting older is losing the power that we did have, losing power over our children or households, losing power over our earnings and abilities to make associations and move about in the world, losing power over some of our own biological functions, and eventually losing the power to make our own decisions for ourselves, as we again become like the children we once were.

The Shepherd Psalm appeals to us in our various life stages of powerlessness, vulnerability and insecurity. We use the psalm at the time of death because that is the ultimate moment of powerlessness as human beings. We have lost all power, even the power of life. But, as with most things related to death and dying and funerals and memorials, what we do and say is only partially about the one who dies. Thomas Lynch, the Michigan undertaker who is also a poet and novelist, says that we must always remember when making arrangements at the time of death that "the dead don't care." That is what being dead means. No more cares. So we do what we do for the sake of the living, for those who still care. Whether or not the dying hear us mutter the words of the psalm or a benediction or our own words of thanks or remorse or whatever, the point is that we need to say them. They are

for us. We need to know that God is with us, even in this moment of utter loss, loss of power, loss of all security, loss of life. The very center of the psalm and its appeal are the words, "I fear no evil; for you are with me." It is as we say at Christmas, Immanuel: God is with us. We are not alone.

When we lay a loved one to rest, we offer them to the care of God, into the loving arms of God. Perhaps the most powerful words I am privileged to offer as a pastor are these, called the commendation, which come at the very end of a funeral service:

*Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant ---. Acknowledge, we humbly pray, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, and a child of your own redeeming. Receive this one into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the company of the saints in light.*

In the face of the powerlessness, vulnerability and insecurity of death, we are bold to speak gospel words of comfort and hope. It is in the power of the resurrection, the invulnerability of God's eternal love, and the security of everlasting peace, that each of us lives and dies.

The Lord is our shepherd. God is with us. We shall not want. We shall lack nothing. With these words even the shy among us can look one another right in the eye. We can march right up to the tomb and look even death right in the eye.

I fear no evil. You are with me. Thanks be to God.