

PENTECOST 9 ~ July 22, 2018

READINGS: 2 Samuel 7: 1-14a ~ Psalm 23 ~ Ephesians 2:11-22 ~ Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

These sayings are written in order that you might come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the great I am. And that by believing in Him you may have life eternal. Amen.

I am the good shepherd. The Good Shephard lays down his life for the sheep. These are the famous words from John's gospel, one of the seven I am sayings; words of great comfort that harken back to the Old Testament Days.

Legend has labelled the 23rd Psalm, the psalm of David, the great shepherd king of Israel.

Its images are not new to us. We have been praying, singing and meditating on this song for more than 2500 years. Once again we invoke the images of God as our shepherd in much the same way our ancestors have done over all these years.

We know it well. We find comfort in it. It is an expression of the trust we have in the God who has our backs during the tough times.

Jesus confesses to being the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. That is what makes him good according to John—his willingness to get involved, to risk his life for the life of his flock.

HIS Flock. Not somebody else's flock, but his own flock- the one he has bought and bred, doctored and protected. He is invested in it in more ways than one. According to tradition wherever the sheep were there was the shepherd. Up in those Galilean hills in the all sorts of weather, night and day. No one could separate the shepherd from his flock.

His sheep are his lively hood and his life. They are also his extended family. They know his voice, his touch, they know the way he walks.

When they are grazing with a thousand other sheep and he calls them, they will separate themselves from the crowd and follow him home. His flute is the sound of safety for them--- the sound of still waters and green pastures. He knows them too, by name and disposition.

He knows Houdini, who is always escaping or wandering off and getting himself tangled in the thorn bushes. Then there is Pegleg, the One who stepped into the gopher hole and is currently walking with a limp. All will be made well with the shepherd's touch and care as he spends the extra time to gather the herbs to apply a poultice to the injured limb.

There's Bossy, who spends a lot of her time butting heads trying to point the others in the right direction.

The flock depends on the shepherd for every aspect of their lives and they are his own. He has a certain kind of relationship with them. It is the kind of ownership that is not about possession, but more about being bound to us and we to him.

As it goes with the sheep of the pasture, it also goes the same with our relationship with the Jesus our Good Shepherd.

It's about the sort of relationship that shows we are bound to something beyond ourselves.

The shepherd's willingness to risk one's own safety in order to defend the life of the other, not because the sheep cannot take care of themselves, but because God cares for his people, the sheep of his flock.

We are warned about getting involved in other people's troubles. We learn very quickly in life that it is best to mind our own business and let other people mind theirs. We want to be careful to crossing boundaries or developing co-dependencies. When we make a habit of rescuing other people we prevent them from learning about the consequences of their actions.

From time to time however, we all deserve to have someone in our lives who will stand up and be counted, someone who will have your back. This is the sort of person who demonstrates that good shepherd kind of love, the self-giving agape sort of love, the kind of love we sing about in the Psalm.

A hired hand is not the shepherd. He wouldn't even know our names. A hired hand would take one look at the wolf bearing down on the flock and vanish as quickly as possible. Because the hired hand does not care for the sheep; he does not own them, involve himself deeply with them and therefore has no stake in protecting them. He minds his own business and take care of himself.

The good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep. We are reminded of this because on the night before our shepherd died, the sheep, they all fell asleep after a big Passover meal, with the sound of the shepherd's flute in their ears. And as they slept, they shared a terrible dream of wolves with clubs and torches who came out of the woods, led their shepherd away, and tore him to shreds on a hillside outside of town.

In the dream, they huddled in safety, unable to think, unable to move, and they stayed that way for three whole days, wondering if they would starve to death before the wolves came back to finish the job. But on the third day, they heard a flute far away at first, then drawing nearer- it awoke them from their sleep, and they stood once again in the presence of their good shepherd.

Looking around at each other, they saw what had happened. They had fallen asleep as sheep, but they had woken up as shepherds of their master, and as they stood there staring at one another he handed them staves like his, and flutes and sent them out to gather their flocks. Do for them as I did for you, He said and He played them a little tune as they set out to do just that.

Amen.

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