

Psalm 23
1 John 3: 16-24
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
April 29, 2012

As I grow in my relationship with scripture I am coming to hear and experience the words in a new way. Whereas I was taught to read the Bible in order to discover what to believe about God, I have increasingly come to scripture to listen. When I say, “listen” I mean, first of all, to listen to the words themselves: How they sound; how they bounce off the sound boards of my ears and in my soul. A popular word these days in spiritual speech is “resonance.” So we listen to how the sounds of the words that vibrate in our auditory nerves *re-sound* in our hearts. Often this experience has little or nothing to do with the content of the words. Like deeply melodic music, sound can enter the soul where rational meaning cannot go. It is why many people come to worship to make contact with God, *not* by the brilliant inspirational message of the sermon; but by the music. It is why some people love a given hymn but cannot tell you the words. It is why some people prefer to hear scripture in the language of the King James Version; because of the beauty of the poetic rendering of Hebrew and Greek and not necessarily due to the meaning of the translation. It is also why Martin Luther preferred his congregants to listen to the Word of God, what he called “the shouted word.” By which he understood that when we listen to the Word read and preached the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts individually and together. Hearing bypasses our analytical minds that can’t help but weigh and sift and engage in the struggle of what we believe and what we reject.

This leads to a second evolution. Instead of the Bible being ultimate truth with which I must wrestle in order to understand, or as a source of doctrine, or as a

battleground of what I believe or do not believe, I have come to experience scripture as a vast chorus of voices which have *encountered God*. Not all of the voices are sweet and harmonious. There are sharp and angry voices. There are voices of anguish and despair, fear and hostility. Thus at risk of being branded a heretic, I propose that we may speak of the Bible not *only* as the Word of God, but also as the words of humanity's encounter *with* and experience *of* God.

As a case in point I present the most beloved scripture in the entire Bible. I will quote it in the King James Version:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil
for Thou art with me.
Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.
Thou anointest my head with oil.
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Now suppose we approached this prayerful song of King David as a text of God's Word in the narrow sense of a scripture which we must accept and believe at face value. Well, let's see. How many shepherds do we know? What does a shepherd do that is so significant that for David the Lord is his shepherd? Does this mean that David thinks of himself as a sheep? Am I to think of myself as a sheep? When was the last time I had any extended time observing sheep? Is this how God sees us? As dependent and unintelligent farm animals?

Now, if I was sitting where you are and some arrogant preacher was shooting off his mouth about a psalm that has guided me all my life and provided comfort and reassurance to me and millions of others, I would be indignant! After all, you will say, this is a song of faith! This is how David experiences God! After all pastor, David started out as a shepherd. He knew what it was like to look after sheep and to care for them. He knew that there is preciousness in creatures that humans do not know because we are so self-conscious and self-centered. Because he was a good and caring shepherd, David knew that he cared for the sheep whether they were aware of it or not. Thus he transfers the relationship of shepherd and sheep to God and himself.

Thus David trusts that God cares about him; cares about where he is; what he is doing. God watches over him whether he, David, is aware of it not. Indeed through his life David has been in numerous scrapes. He has been hunted down, betrayed, lost close friends, been in bloody battles, committed adultery and murder. He has lost children and known the anguish of his own son seeking to overthrow him. Through it all he has experienced the abiding care of God.

God has caused David to lie down in green pastures from which he can smell the earth, hear the wind rustle through the grass and tickle his skin, feel the sun on his body and notice the white woolly clouds just above the trees. Thus David in the midst of the stress and turmoil of life recovers the critical fact that he is not the center of the universe. Everything does not depend on him. Indeed everything depends on God. David is seen by God and cared for.

In the same way David experiences God leading him to profoundly... still...waters—waters which are so clear and deep that he can notice the flecks of mica

reflecting the sun from the sandy bottom. Yet at the same time giving David the sense that, were he to dive in, he would swim and swim and never touch the bottom. Thus God leads David to recognize that God is that still and perfectly clear pool—quietly, calmly, without the faintest trace of anxiety, *present* within David.

It is then that David recognizes that what the sheep never worries about. God cares for him every day, every hour, every minute and second. From his conception deep in the heart of God, throughout his life, to his last breath and beyond, David *has dwelt* and *will dwell forever* in the house of the Lord. This is the moment when he realizes what the sheep know: that true peace comes from finding and accepting his place in creation. For he recognizes that it is only when he truly recognizes that he is a precious creation of God, every in God's sight—that it matters to God when he trips and falls; that it matters to God when his heart breaks; that it matters to God when he is lost in life, and that God will spare no effort in finding him and restoring his soul; that God rejoices in his success and even laughs at his bad jokes—it is only then that David can be led to new pastures.

You know all this simply by listening to the words. But if there is someone who hears the words and experiences sadness or yearning or being on the outside looking in, I plead with you to seek me out. For I am your *pastor*; which at root means *herdsman*, *shepherd*. I am but a poor stand in for the true shepherd and I often get lost myself. But I believe I know where I can find him; or more to the point I know that if I stay still long enough he will find me. I invite you to let me help you be found. Amen