

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Lord is Our Shepherd: I Shall Not Want”

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Psalm 23; Luke 15:1-7

My parents loved Marty. He was my parents’ pastor for almost fifteen years and they loved his sermons. They liked the stands he took on issues of race and poverty. They appreciated him as a teacher. And Marty was not only important to my parents but he was the one who helped me to discern my call to ministry and he participated in my wedding service, helping to send Cindy and I on to continual wedded bliss...well most of the time. But there was something about Marty that was always a bit off putting. And that was this sense that whenever you were talking to him one on one, that you were not there. It was as if he was looking through you, or past you, to some far away distant land, or to some other deep theological thought. As if even when he would say “John it is great to see you,” he was speaking to a non-existent entity. Eventually I asked my parents if that was their experience of Marty as well, and they smiled and said, oh yes, it’s just the way he is.

Have any of you ever experienced that sense, that reality, that somehow you were right there, but you were invisible? Maybe it was at work when you did exceptionally well, but no one noticed your presence? Maybe it was in your family and you had other siblings who shined so brightly that you were just kind of forgotten? Maybe it was a store where everyone else got waited on and you were left wandering the aisles. Maybe it was in a conversation...wait a second (pull out phone and look at it...then return to the congregation) oh where were we...when something like that happened? While these may seem to be trivial kinds of incidents, what they can do is trigger not only our frustration, but also a sense that we don’t really matter. That we aren’t important as human beings; that we have no value and no worth. After all, if we are invisible then why bother at all? If we are not valuable enough to be acknowledged, then surely that must say something about us. And my friends this is not new. This is as ancient as the story of Job where Job wonders about his own value and worth when it seems God is not listening.

If you have ever been invisible and wondered if someone cared for you and about you and your intrinsic worth, then this Psalm is for you. It is for you because it says that you matter deeply to God. You matter deeply to God because God is your shepherd and the shepherd cares about all his sheep, including you. Here’s why.

First, the shepherd cares for every sheep. One of the realities of being a shepherd was that every sheep mattered. At the most basic level every sheep was an asset. It was part and parcel of a shepherd’s inventory. To lose a sheep then was to diminish one’s inventory, an inventory that was difficult to replace. There were no Sheep Stores where one could go and buy new inventory. You had to wait for birthing season to come around again and hope for the best. In addition, many shepherds cared not just for their sheep, but also for the community’s sheep. Thus, whenever a sheep went missing, the shepherd had to go and find it, to account for it, so that they would not be accused of theft. Both of these ideas form the basis for Jesus’ story about the hundred sheep; that when one goes missing, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and goes in search of the one lost sheep and that when he brings it home, everyone celebrates. Everyone celebrates because

every sheep matters. Every sheep matters to the shepherd and to the community. We are never invisible to God, because we each matter.

Second, the shepherd marks every sheep. I don't know about you, but to me, one sheep looks like every other sheep. Sure, there are some sheep that are a little larger and others a little smaller, or some that are slightly different shades, but all in all they are just sheep. They are just wool covered quadrupeds. The question becomes then, how do shepherds tell their sheep from the sheep of other shepherds? How do shepherds settle disagreements over ownership. The answer is that every shepherd marks their own sheep. They do so with a distinctive mark on one ear of each of their sheep. This way if there is ever any doubt as to ownership, it is easily resolved. This mark of ownership is something that God has always done for God's people. In the Old Testament it was circumcision. In the New Testament it was baptism. In these two acts God marked God's people as God's own. And by so doing God was saying that God cared so much for God's people that God would never let them go. God would never give them to another shepherd. God would always be able to tell which were God's own sheep so that God could care deeply for them.

Finally, the shepherd insures that the sheep lack nothing that they need. One of the interesting things about reading the Bible is that we are at the mercy of the translators. And in this opening of the 23rd Psalm, the first line is usually translated, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." That ending, I shall not want, has been taken by many to mean that whatever I want, God is supposed to provide. God is supposed to ensure that I am healthy, wealthy and wise. That I have flat abs and a full head of hair. That I never have any difficulty in my life. Whatever I want is whatever I ought to have. Yet, that is not what the original text says, or means. The Hebrew states that the shepherd insures that the sheep lack nothing that they need. They will not lack for water or food. They will not lack for care or protection. Which is, by the way, what is described in the rest of the Psalm. It describes what the shepherd provides that the sheep require. In a sense, what the Psalmist refers to here is what someone once described as Rolling Stones theology. You may not always get what you want, but you will always get what you need.

My friends, we live in a world that often seems indifferent to our existence. In which it is easy to be invisible. In which it is easy to wonder about our worth and value. What this Psalm tells us is that we matter. We matter to God so much that God has found us, marked us and provides for us. We matter so much to God that God became one of us in Jesus Christ to show that love. This understanding then offers us two challenges. The first is, as I have said before, to awaken everyday with the acknowledgement that we are not invisible people; that we belong to and have been marked by God. Second, it is to insure as best we can that those people with whom we interact, are not invisible to us; that by our fully acknowledging their presence and humanity, we become Christ to them, reminding them that they too are loved.

My challenge then is to ask yourselves, how am I living into the reality that I am loved by God in the way I treat myself and the way I treat others.