

bible⁺study: april 2017

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

April 2, 2017 Text: Psalm 23 “God as Our Shepherd”

Reading this week’s study text probably stirs memories for each of us. Perhaps this 23rd Psalm was read at a loved one’s funeral. Or maybe we recall proudly reciting it on Children’s Sunday sixty years ago. Then, there was the time we used cotton at Vacation Bible School to make little lambs as we talked about the good Shepherd.

And, in remembering Psalm 23, we are usually bringing back the language of the King James Version. Other translations may be more precisely accurate to the Hebrew language, but they seem to falter in the rhythm of our heartbeats.

Even though the psalm offers the power of assurance, it does not turn its back on the realities of life. I get tired and need to rest (Psalm 23:2). Sometimes choosing a path is not easy (Psalm 23:4). There is evil in the world (Psalm 23:4). We have enemies (Psalm 23:5). My very being, my soul, gets worn out (Psalm 23:2).

Images of sheep and shepherds seem a bit “back then” in our world of self-driving cars and instant electronic communication and Internet research. (“It must be true because I read it on Wikipedia.”) Even though “ruminant mammals” may not be part of our daily routine, we recognize the gifts the psalmist describes: the Lord with me in danger (v. 4); I’m nourished even when there are those who seem to harm me (v. 5); I am

pursued by God’s love (v. 6); and there is no time limit to these blessings (v. 6).

David Kalas has noted how the psalmist shifts gears (actually, Kalas says that the psalmist changes pronouns) in verse 4. Now, instead of speaking in the third person of “the Lord,” the psalmist begins to refer to God in much more intimate terms of the second person: “You.” There is a personal relationship in saying “You are with me,” more than in saying “He is with me.” The psalmist reveals and invites us to experience a closer connection with the Shepherd.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Walter Brueggemann (*From Whom No Secrets Are Hid*, Westminster John Knox) compares Psalm 22 (“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me”) with Psalm 23: “When we taken Psalm 23 by itself as the church is wont to do, it may claim too quickly that ‘all is well.’ Psalm 22 knows better than that. Psalm 22 knows that the darkness must be fully and deeply engaged...The miracle of it all is that Israel and, after Jesus, the church have found the stamina and grounding to confess, in the abandonment, God can yet be trusted.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Shepherd God, find me when I wander...”

April 9, 2017 Text: John 3:1-16, “God’s Saving Love in Christ”

Sometimes when I come across a text as familiar as this one (How many times has that guy sat in the end zone holding a sign that read “John 3:16”?), I scout out other translations, less well known, so that there might be some freshness to the well-worn words.

Look at Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase: “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one needs to be destroyed.”

Clarence Jordan put it this way: “In the same way, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that whoever trusts him might not die, but might have spiritual life.”

There is a Bible prepared for persons in Russia. When the Russian is translated into English, it says: “Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son. God gave his Son so that every person that believes in him would not be lost, but have life forever.”

The Contemporary English Version has: “God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die.”

And perhaps the most recognized of all: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him

should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (King James Version)

How do we continue to learn from and grow because of a biblical passage that we have heard over and over? One way is to read the text aloud and each time you read it, put the emphasis on a different word. For example, “For *God* so loved the world...” has a different feel than “For God so loved the *world*...” “God so loved the world that he *gave*...” stirs feelings and thoughts that might be missed when we say “God so loved the world that he gave his *only* Son.” Try it.

John 3:16 is Good News: “good” because it tells of salvation, “news” because the love of God is fresh every morning.

What Someone Else Has Said:

John Tyson (*The Way of the Wesleys*, Eerdmans) gave this summary: “First, the *universal* offer of God’s salvation to all people through faith in Jesus Christ. The second item, ‘all people can *know* they are saved,’ reminds us of the ‘witness of the Spirit’...and the last aspect, ‘all people can be saved to the *utmost*.’”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, help me to live thanks...”

April 16, 2017 Text: John 20:1-10; 1 Peter 1:3-5, 8-9 “God’s Love as Victory over Death”

These two Easter texts represent two time frames: (a) an account of two of the disciples, who had been with Jesus, now going to the tomb and finding it empty (John 20:3-8); (b) a reminder that one did not have to walk on earth with Jesus in order to love him and still to find the tomb empty (1 Peter 1:8).

In some ways, I wonder if people in the southern hemisphere find Easter more remarkable, more miraculous than do those of us in the northern hemisphere. Around here, we conflate Easter with springtime and new growth. In the southern hemisphere, it is autumn and there are no signs of the freshness of life. How would Easter be different for us if we looked out the window and saw dead leaves still falling off the trees?

Of course, the power of the resurrection is not limited to this one Sunday. Easter is full-time. It was true even when most of the disciples did not believe it (John 20:9). It was true even when they tried to go about business as usual, simply returning to their friends (John

20:10). It was true even when the people to whom Peter wrote had never seen Jesus (1 Peter 1:8).

One year when I was a little boy, Easter Sunday was a deluge of rain, so the Easter eggs got hidden inside the house rather than in the yard. I found them all---except one. I found that one some months later when a dreadful stink arose from a decorative tea pot on the shelf. That certainly reminded me (and my nose) of the Easter that had been.

What does it take to remind us of Easter in December? What does it take to remind us of Easter when illness threatens to dominate us? What does it take to remind us of Easter when division and separation tug at the life of the Church? What does it take to remind us of Easter when the flowers of hope have long since faded?

The answer to each of these questions is: It takes the presence of the risen Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, that manifestation
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of the resurrection lives among us. Peter reminds his readers that it is through God’s faithfulness, not ours, that we are guarded for salvation (1 Peter 1:5). Thanks be to God.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Christian Art of Dying* (Eerdmans), Allen Verhey has reflected:

April 23, 2017 Text: Romans 5:6-11; 8:31-39 “God’s Reconciling Love”

Last year, on the Sunday after Easter, I attended a “Holy Hilarity” service. From the moment I entered the church building and was handed a kazoo to the time we were invited to stand and tell jokes to the call for the offering (Knock knock. Who’s there? Philip. Philip Who? Fill up these baskets; it’s time for the offering), we had simple joy and laughter. The idea behind the service was that the resurrection meant that the joke was on the devil. The forces of Death thought they had won on Good Friday, but then came Sunday! We can laugh and rejoice because God has won!

In this week’s study, we see Paul expand on that theme. Not only has death been defeated, but also the vicissitudes of life have been overcome. Not only that, but nothing we can imagine or experience, now or in the future, can separate us from what the Common English Bible calls God’s “sweeping victory” (Romans 8:37).

This is not to say that there won’t be tough times. This is not to say that there won’t be disappointments. This is not to say that we shall live perfect, sin-free lives. It is to say that none of this can keep God from loving us (Romans 8:38-9).

Romans 8:33-34 uses legal courtroom language to talk about how Christ goes to bat for us. It seems that our attorney is also the judge! Not a bad deal! Jesus Christ is the judge (John 5:22). Jesus Christ is our attorney (Romans 8:34). After making that point Paul launches

“The basis of our hope is not the immortality of the soul. The basis of our hope is the power of God to raise the dead.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, I claim Your risen presence...”

into the list of things that some might see as our downfall (Romans 8:35), but when Christ Jesus is our defense attorney, we already know how the trial will end.

The remarkable thing about all this is that God did not wait until we had our act together to implement this gift of reconciliation (Romans 5:6, 8). Christ died for us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). The Greek word for “sinner” describes someone who has not gotten the prize because they missed the target. (As a dartball player, I know this happens a lot!) But even though we do not deserve the prize, in Christ Jesus, it is given to us (Romans 5:11).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Ted A. Campbell (*Wesleyan Beliefs*, Kingswood Books) has written: “It may be important to note in this regard that in explaining Christ’s work, John Wesley pointed to many elements of Christ’s saving work, including substitution, sacrifice, suffering, Christ’s [priestly intercession, and the notion of Christ’s victory over the powers of evil (Christus Victor) as elements of Christ’s work of salvation.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, this day we laugh at the power of Death, because we have seen Your victory, now given to us...”

April 30, 2017 Text: John 10:1-15 “God’s Preserving Love”

My pastor often says, “The preacher preaches what she needs to hear.” Some commentators say that Charles Wesley wrote the hymn “Give Me the Faith Which Can Remove” (hymn 650, *United Methodist Hymnal*) at a time when the hot energy of his conversion had begun to wane. He may be preaching what he needs to hear. The hymn begs God to restore Charles Wesley’s passion for preaching. The closing stanza is such a plea:

Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart with boundless charity divine,
So shall I all my strength exert, and love them with a zeal like thine,
And lead them to thy open side, the sheep for whom the Shepherd died.

The idea that a shepherd might actually die for the sheep must have come as a shock to the disciples (John 10:11, 15). In daily life, they might have known one or two instances when town gossip said that a local shepherd had been killed trying to protect the sheep. But this is Jesus! They don’t expect him to die, much less to give up his life for lowly sheep! Over and over again, Jesus tried to teach about His death: Luke 18:33, John 10:18, Mark 9:31-32, Matthew 16:21-22, Luke 9:44-45, for example. The disciples couldn’t hear what He was trying to say.

It is one thing to accept the fact that Jesus is going to die, and it is quite another thing to accept the reality that He is going to die because of me! The text in this week’s study suggests that the disciples could not

grasp either of those realities, especially that they “were the sheep for whom the Shepherd died.” I can hardly blame the disciples. I am on this side of the story and it is still difficult for me to acknowledge that my sin is the pivoting force in the death of Jesus.

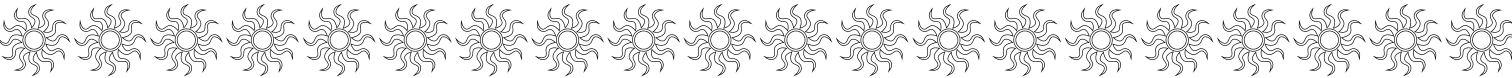
In these verses, Jesus builds on the metaphor of the relationship between sheep and the shepherd. He is well into his teaching when He surprises the disciples by saying, in effect, “I’m not just giving a lesson in animal husbandry. I’m talking about you and me” (John 10:7, 11, 15). I just read the text again and once I reached verse 7, every time I saw the word “sheep,” I changed it to my own name. Let me warn you: Doing that can change you.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Counterfeit Christianity* (Abingdon), Roger Olson has argued: “...The effect of Christ’s death was not just an example of love that enables sinners to love God; it was also and most importantly a transaction of some kind, a sacrifice, a payment of a debt, a conquest of the forces of evil that kept God and humanity apart.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Savior, like a shepherd lead us, much we need thy tender care; in thy pleasant pastures feed us, for our use thy folds prepare...Blessed Jesus! Thou hast boughed us, thine we are...”



Is Your Hut Burning?

The only survivor of a shipwreck was washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed feverishly for God to rescue him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming. Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements, and to store his few possessions. But then one day, after scavenging for food, he arrived home to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up to the sky. The worst had happened; everything was lost. He was stunned with grief and anger.

"God, how could you do this to me!" he cried. Early the next day, however, he was awakened by the sound of a ship that was approaching the island. It had come to rescue him. "How did you know I was here?" asked the weary man of his rescuers. "We saw your smoke signal," they replied.

It is easy to get discouraged when things are going bad. But we shouldn't lose heart, because God is at work in our lives, even in the midst of pain and suffering. Remember, next time your little hut is burning to the ground---it just may be a smoke signal that summons the grace of God.

Excerpt from <http://www.fatsheep.org/articles/inspiration/hutburning.php>