

“Baa. . . .”

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Texts: Psalm 23, John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:9-17

One of the ways you can say goodbye in Arabic, is *allah ma'kum*. You may recognize the Arabic word for God, Allah, as a part of this phrase. The rest of it means “be with you.” *Allah ma'kum* means “God be with you,” or “God go with you.” So when Arabs say goodbye to you, they’re not just acknowledging a parting, they’re also saying a kind of blessing. Actually, that’s what “goodbye” originally meant in English, too. The beginning of the word “goodbye” in Old English was “God.” It was changed to “good” later on to make it conform to “good day.”

I remember with acute embarrassment one particular *allah ma'kum* directed at me. I was traveling in Lebanon during a particularly tense time, when the country was divided up into zones of control among various militias and the Syrian army. Three American colleagues and I had been trying to get from Beirut to Cyprus. The Beirut airport was closed, and our friends in Beirut had convinced us that the ferry journey would be too uncomfortable at a time of the year when the Mediterranean could be very choppy. They arranged for us to take a taxi from Beirut to Damascus; we could fly from there back to Cyprus. In those days Damascus was a lot safer than it is now. Normally, it would be a short trip by car from Beirut to Damascus, maybe 3 hours. But those weren’t normal times, and we had to take a very indirect route, through snowy mountain passes and into the

Beka'a valley which was then under the control of the Syrian Army and a variety of militias.

Our driver was a savvy Sunni Muslim, who didn't much like any of the people who were manning the checkpoints along the way. But he did like a guy named Johnny Walker. He communed with Johnny Walker as we were leaving Beirut; he refueled after he had changed a flat tire; he took sips from his flask after each checkpoint. Finally, when we were out of the mountains, we all relaxed (except for the driving while buzzed part)—until we were flagged down by a couple of Shi'ite militiamen who were selling newspapers at the roadside. I think they must have been doing pretty well, because they were making an offer that was hard to refuse. They were armed with semi-automatic rifles. Our driver was outraged by this extortion. He explained to one of the militiamen, in Arabic, that these foreigners riding with him didn't speak or read Arabic, and therefore they would have no use for his newspapers. I was sitting next to our driver in the front seat. The militiaman looked at me, and asked, "Tahki al-'Arabi?" which means "Do you speak Arabic?" "La," "no," I responded, in Arabic. And just to make matters worse, I clicked my tongue and raised my eyebrows, which is a slangy local way of saying a more informal "No." The militiaman shrugged and waved us on. "Allah ma'kum," he said. "God go with you." We drove on until these armed men were out of sight, and then our driver pulled over and glared at me. "I don't know who's stupider: you or him," he said.

"God go with you." In the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, one of the most compelling images of God's persistent loving care is the image of the shepherd who accompanies the sheep. Our call to worship this morning, the 23rd Psalm, is perhaps the most familiar passage in the whole Bible. It's one of the first things many of us learned by heart, and it's likely that it will be said over us after we die. Even people who have lost large chunks of their memory to dementia can

repeat the familiar words of this Psalm. When they hear those familiar words, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” something deeper than conscious thought is touched. It’s a Psalm of comfort. It’s an embedded assurance that God is always with us, even if we can’t formulate that thought, or express it.

Today, the fourth Sunday in Easter, is always Good Shepherd Sunday. All three of our readings this morning: the Psalm, and the passages from John and Revelation that we just heard, talk about God, or Jesus, as our shepherd. It’s a wonderful image of God, but it’s not such a complimentary description of us, when you think about it. My first confirmation class in Rhinelander loved a song they learned at a confirmation retreat at Moon Beach, “I just wanna be a sheep.” Not a very ambitious goal, we might think. It’s one thing to know that we can be, and often are, like sheep; it’s another to make being a sheep our purpose in life “I just wanna be a sheep. Baa, baa, baa, baa.”

Sheep aren’t particularly bright; they’re not particularly ambitious; they are the exemplars of the “flock mentality.” When they do set out on their own, they invariably get into trouble. Remember Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep and the Good Shepherd: the story about the one sheep out of the hundred in the flock who goes missing? Remember how the good shepherd leaves the ninety-nine others in the wilderness to go in search of that one lost sheep? Pastors—and the word “pastor” means “shepherd”—sometimes joke that while the shepherd goes after that one lost lamb, another two or three inevitably wander off, which is why being a shepherd is an endless and occasionally frustrating role in life.

But, let’s be clear, we are smarter than sheep. We have good brains, brains that have probed the mysteries of the universe, brains that have developed the wonders of technology, brains that have composed gorgeous music and created profound writing. But one thing that we do have in common with sheep, that our good

brains have in common with their very limited ones, is that we are both not only capable of making bad decisions, but also that we both make bad decisions with disturbing frequency and regularity. We both wander off; we both get into trouble, and both of us usually require help to get out of trouble. But to the Good Shepherd, every one of us, every wandering one of us, matters, and matters, and matters infinitely.

So, here's one thing we can learn about our relationship with God when we think of God as the Good Shepherd, and of ourselves as the sheep. God stays with us, and God leads us. Note that God doesn't protect us. In fact God, like any good parent, loves us too much to take away our freedom, even the freedom to make bad choices. So God doesn't offer us protection, including protection from ourselves, but God does offer us support. The good shepherd doesn't carry a whip to keep us in line, or a rifle to protect us from the wolves; the good shepherd carries a staff with a crook on the end of it which he uses to pull us out of the complicating brambles we've gotten ourselves snagged on; or out of the pitfalls of life into which we've fallen. The Good Shepherd is relentless in his leadership. The Good Shepherd never gives up on us. And God doesn't just lead us out of things; God leads us into things, along the paths of righteousness, or justice.

And here's another thing we can learn from this Psalm about God, the Shepherd. God comforts us. The word comfort itself has wandered off a bit from its original meaning from the Latin, which is "being strong through." (You musicians may recognize in "comfort" the cognate word "forte", which means "strong" or "loud.") God can't take away challenges from us, but God does help us to be strong during difficult times in our lives. After all, the Psalmist doesn't say that God leads us *around* or *past* the valley of the shadow of death; God leads us *through* the valley of the shadow of death. Perhaps this is why the 23rd Psalm is such a favorite among people who find themselves face-to-face with death, when

they've gone beyond the point at which they think they can skirt the inevitable. God gives us the strength to face death; God leads us through that valley of the shadow of death. God doesn't clear our world of enemies; God prepares a table for us in their presence. God helps us to deal with the reality of evil in our world, not by banishing it, but by empowering us to deal with it.

In our Gospel reading from John, Jesus refers to yet one more attribute of the Good Shepherd—and here he's talking about his own relationship with his followers. The Good Shepherd knows his flock, and the members of his flock know him. "My sheep hear my voice," he says. "I know them, and they follow me." Along with the shepherd's crook that pulls us out of the messes we've made of our lives there is the shepherd's voice, sometimes comforting, sometimes cajoling, always speaking to us not in bland generality but with acutely personal precision. The Good Shepherd knows us, each of us, and calls us by name with a voice that is authentic, that can only be his. Out of the clamor of all the voices that call to us, we recognize the voice of our shepherd, our leader, our savior.

But just when we think we've got it figured out: God is our shepherd, or Jesus is our shepherd; the scripture throws us one more image that just seems to confuse things. Our other reading from the New Testament was from the book of Revelation, a book that is a favorite among televangelists who like to use the Bible as a kind of horoscope to predict the future. But Revelation was written not so much to predict the future as to describe the harsh realities of the present, to try to make sense of them, and to articulate a hope for the future. John's Revelation was written for a church that was experiencing the tribulations of the Roman Empire. In coded language the book's readers would have been encouraged by its bold assertion that present-day miseries will ultimately be transformed into the glory of God's realm, that all this will happen through the power of the blood of the Lamb, the Lamb that was slain, Jesus.

But wait a minute. Didn't we just say that Jesus is the Good Shepherd? So how did he become a lamb? Well, it's because the good shepherd is willing to sacrifice his life for the sheep; he's willing to become our sacrificial lamb. Jesus was willing to sacrifice his life for us by being one of us, by becoming a helpless lamb before the powers and the principalities of his time. Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself not because God is some kind of awful sadist who requires blood payment for our sins, but because the ultimate revelation of God's love for us is God's willingness to give us Jesus--Jesus the teacher and healer; Jesus, who went to the cross for us; Jesus who, in his resurrection, forever conquers the fear of death in us. This sacrifice isn't about paying for our sins through the death of an innocent man; it's about showing us, and showing the world, what love really means. The Shepherd is so identified with the flock that he becomes one of them.

For this reason they are before the throne of God (says the writer of Revelation),

And worship God day and night within his temple, and
The one who is seated on throne will shelter them.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
The sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;
For the Lamb at the center of their throne will be their shepherd,
And he will guide them to the springs of the water of life,
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

The Lord is my Shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He guides me to the springs of the water of life. He restores my soul. God will wipe away every tear from my eyes. I just wanna be a sheep. So be it. Amen.