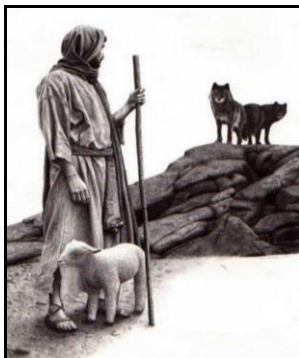


DO WE REALLY WANT A SHEPHERD?



Scripture:

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

1 John 3:16-24

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



OUR GOOD SHEPHERD

It is still the Easter season. Thank goodness we are so blessed to have a safe place to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord who we sometimes think of as our Good Shepherd. When we hear “The Lord is my shepherd,” from Psalm 23, I think most of us feel calm and enjoy the reminder in that comforting Psalm that God will

walk with us in the valley of the shadow of death. When the earthquake hit Nepal, the images reminded me of the way Haiti was tragically affected five years ago. This Psalm came to mind, hoping somehow it might bring some comfort to those involved.

But the Psalm starts out with, The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.....

Many people get confused when reading these words because it sounds like the psalmist who wrote this is saying that he doesn't want his shepherd. But the true meaning is: I shall not be in want. That gives it a whole different meaning, doesn't it? It means we will not want for anything when the Lord is our shepherd.

Sounds wonderful to not feel the need to want or yearn for things. Yet, when we seriously look at what it means to have a shepherd, guiding us through life, keeping us from self-destruction, and reminding us to obey God's commandments, many of us don't truly want a shepherd.

DOING WHAT FEELS GOOD

Deep down, when we are honest, we want to just do what feels good and go through life fulfilling just our own needs as they come along.

My first roommate in college had grown up in a very strict Baptist family. As soon as she felt free and independent at college, she put up a poster that said in big letters, "*IF IT FEELS GOOD DO IT!*" Sadly, that didn't work too well for her. She ended up dropping out of college and getting married way too young. The marriage didn't last long.

All of us seem to have episodes in our development when we rebel against God or try to live a life of pleasure-seeking, ignoring what our inner shepherd might be telling us. But like the prodigal son, it often ends badly in a shallow life without much purpose or meaning.

A HUMBLE BUT IMPORTANT ROLE

In the days of Jesus, a shepherd had a humble but very important role in that society. (Sheep and goats sustained the economy in ancient Israel. Having a flock was a sign of wealth in the early Hebrew pastoral economy.)

And the shepherd worked hard to keep the flock out of trouble. He gently guided with the shepherd's crook that could also be used as a weapon against predators. According to the

Bible, Christ is the kind of shepherd that will go after even just one lost sheep because he cares so deeply for each one. When we open ourselves up to guidance from our shepherd who keeps us from going astray, we end up leading much more fulfilling lives. But it takes humility and an appreciation of the shepherd. If you don't know the shepherd, you can't fully appreciate the guidance.

First John, chapter three, tells us that when we deeply consider how Jesus laid down his life for each one of us, out of gratitude we should do the same for others. Whoa! That is a tall order isn't it!

But that doesn't mean we have to go up on a cross exactly the way Christ did. John says we show we abide in Jesus if we help those in need, and love others in truth and action as God loves us.

What it means is that we are willing to give of our lives for others, not let our fears and worries keep us from reaching out and going beyond our comfort zones. Because it is then, when we go beyond, that we find there is more to life than we knew before.

This First John passage really convicts me personally. When it says: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him."

Basically this means, whenever we think evil thoughts in our hearts about another, when we judge or gossip, and don't promote peace with others, we are condemning our hearts before God.

Then it says to abide in Jesus we must follow his commands, which are basically about loving

your neighbor as yourself to show the world you love God.

This is what it means to follow our shepherd, Jesus:

- to live as he would want us to live,
- to follow Jesus Christ, explore new worlds,
- to be willing to go where you have never gone before.

STAR TREK

That sounds similar to what Captain Kirk used to say on Star Trek, remember? I am not a nerdy Trekkie, or maybe I am. I actually have on my bucket list a plan to someday go see the Star Trek museum that was built in Riverside, Iowa. Captain James Kirk was to have been born there according to the Star Trek biography of his character's life.

I was a fan of the original Star Trek television series that started in the late sixties. When I watched it faithfully then, I was too young to realize there were deep theological themes in many of the stories. Five books have been written about the theology of Star Trek. Gene Roddenberry had a theological mind and he included many social justice themes in the episodes, too. Many of the Star Trek stories had relational theological themes set in a science context. There were even some episodes where Spock lost his purely objective way of looking at things and became spiritual!

SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY

Science and theology both study relationships between objects and creatures. John Polkinghorne, a physicist and an Anglican priest, said, "A deeply relational Universe is consonant with a theological belief in the Trinitarian Nature of the Creator of that Universe."

Basically, he meant that when we understand, through science, how all things are related to one another (and not separate), then we can see how that understanding of the world is complementary to our understanding of God.

We consider God to be relational in the Trinity: Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit, and relational with all of nature as well, including us humans.

We are all One.

We come from the One and return to the One.

And within this One Universe what happens, for example in Nepal, affects us here in California, too. Did you feel the impact of the earthquake? If not physically then spiritually? Some people have this ability; they call it connected consciousness.

STAR TREK AND RELIGION

Spock had this ability on Star Trek. Did you know there are college courses designed around Star Trek theology? In a course called "Star Trek and Religion," Professor Lois Daly said her course was meant to open up what religion means in the twenty-first century. As a teen, Daly became fascinated with what she calls Star Trek's "cultural refraction," and the way the Star Trek science fiction stories mirrored present-day conflicts and prejudices. One of her students said, "In a kind of heartfelt way, Star Trek inspires discussions about how people should behave."

So I searched for a Star Trek episode that deals with the struggles we humans go through when we resist following a shepherd.

In season three of the original Star Trek, there was an episode about a planet where the whole population of the people were severely mentally ill. The Starship Enterprise was on a rescue mission. Spock and Captain Kirk beamed down with a cure for the mental illness that

gripped the people who were being cared for by one head psychiatrist. When they got on the planet they discovered it had been taken over by a man who imagined himself to be the greatest starship commander in all the fleet. He could transform himself into any image he wanted to, so he first appeared to them as the psychiatrist in charge of caring for the people of that planet.

During their struggle to gain control of the planet from this sick man, he decides to take over Captain Kirk's role as commander of the Starship Enterprise. He turns himself into a duplicate of Captain Kirk.

So now Spock can't figure out which one is the real Kirk and which one is the fake one. (This is where the shepherd of the sheep theme comes in. The sheep know the shepherd and the shepherds know their sheep.)

So Spock asks each of the lookalike Captain Kirks a series of questions to figure out which one is his real captain and which one he should stun with his laser. But each time the fake Captain Kirk figures out an answer that sounds right to Spock. Let's watch what happens. (A video clip from the episode was shown to the congregation.)

Finally, after Spock gets really confused about which one to stun, one of the Captain Kirks calls out, "Stun us both and save yourself and the Enterprise!"

That was when Spock knew who the real shepherd of the Enterprise was. Only the true shepherd is willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

GOD' DEEP LOVE

Have you grasped the magnitude of that depth of love God has for you in your soul yet? Do you understand what love like that means for your life journey? You can live a life unafraid of death, you can stop comparing yourself to others or stop living anxiously. You can trust that you are loved and cared for in a deeper way beyond what you have ever hoped for or imagined. You

can live free, unencumbered by the messages in our culture that say you are only as good as your material wealth.

God does not want you to be in want, so put your life into the hands of your Good Shepherd! May Jesus guide, restore, and embrace us as we allow him to lead as our Shepherd. Amen

Benediction:

Captain Kirk proved himself by being willing to sacrifice himself for his starship-mates.

God asks each of us to do the same. But in our own unique ways with whatever resources you have been blessed with. You are on the Starship Earth, and your shipmates need you.

In your next episode this week find a new way to show the world that Jesus abides in your heart.

But first receive this priestly blessing with a sign that Spock learned from the Jewish tradition: May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. And may the Lord lift up God's countenance upon you and grant you peace. Amen



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