

**The Shepherd's voice**  
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Scripture: John 10:1-9, Psalm 23

(In today's passage Jesus names himself the shepherd gatekeeper, opening the gate for sheep of his own fold. *He calls the sheep by name* --the passage reads--*and he leads them out. They follow him, because they know his voice...* *Let us pray: Holy one, help us to hear your voice. Amen*)

We know him by his voice. By his voice we know him.

I was just a young woman, still training for the ministry in my Clinical Pastoral Education unit required for ordination. Once a week I was assigned to a nursing home. There, I would visit with residents for several hours and then lead a ½ hour worship service. The nursing home was- just as so many--a place where loving care is offered, but where folks, infirm in mind and body-- too often-- sat looking dispirited, where the halls smell too much of a mix of institutional food, human waste and cleaning fluids.

Being still immature in this work, my first several weeks I prepared elaborately for that ½ hour worship--fancy litanies and reading and short over thought sermons on the scripture. Residents would be wheeled in or shuffle into the room to spend a brief time in prayer. Mostly they sat there looking dispirited—except...

Except when we sang hymns or recited the old favorites of the faith. Suddenly a bent-over man who never spoke word would be singing along. Suddenly, a woman, who hardly knew herself, let alone her families or whereabouts would recite the Lord's prayer or the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm without error.

There I learned what it means to have scripture written on the heart, as one psalmist says....

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I have great admiration for people who can quote scripture. I love it when -- struggling with some dilemma or celebrating some feat—somebody has just the right phrase from the holy text, thereby drawing work-a-day moment close to

the sacred story. It's why I end up spending so much time with theologically conservative people. They know these phrases by heart. Down side is, that they also seem to be able to quote more about sin than grace, and too often, for my taste, lose the sweeping, saving-narrative in the glib half-verse.

We liberal mainline Protestants have a bible problem too. But a few of us even pick up a bible from week to week save a Sunday service here or there. We are convinced that God is gracious and good, but have an only vaguely remembered biblical story or two to back that up

Two untenable positions, on one hand folks looking for a rock-hard truth in a morass of well-rehearsed phrases, on the other folks happy with bible's larger gestures out of a text rarely cracked and barely known.

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This Holy story is not ancient text or abstract truth. It is our story. It is the way by which we recognize the grace, the hope, the deep humanity and profound holiness of our own lives. We lose ourselves amidst the daily tedium, the demands of our possessions, the hurtful interchanges, the driving to and fro, the "what's for dinner," the endless TV drama, the walk the dog, fill the gas, brush the teeth stuff of our lives. We find ourselves, we find, discover, recognize, recall, reclaim ourselves as kin with each other and with our bible friends, as saints and sinners along with the Hannahs and Davids, Simons and Phobes of our text. Their arid lands are our places of want, and their wine-flowing banquets are our promised end. We know ourselves as God's own in this story.

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God's word is to be found in a living relationship with this book. We know the shepherds voice because we listen to it in close and frequent reading. We know the shepherd's voice by pondering, and paraphrasing of this book.

And yes, the nursing home wisdom. Those who have a personal written-on-the-heart bible, have an unequalled gift for knowing the shepherd's voice. Memorizing a text can be a fruitful gift for an intimate acquaintance with scripture.

We know him by his voice. By his voice we know him.

So, since I'm charging you with the task of memorization, I think it only fair to give you the tools by which to do so. Today, I'm going to work with you on a mnemonic framework, and some repetitions so that –with a bit of additional work this week—you will probably be able to recite this psalm by heart next Sunday.

We'll use the King James Version, because its phrases and cadences are most familiar to us.

So lets start off by reading the whole thing together....

(Delivery notes: from here on deliver from the floor and without text—Pattern is to introduce the themes and ideas of the section, say the section together, then go through the schema --*title, basic needs, life of faith*, etc—then say it together from beginning to the end of the section.)

The first sentence of the psalm is kind of a title. The Lord is my Shepard I shall not want. I bet you have that memorized already, so say it with me

The next section is about the basic needs.

He maketh me to lie down in Green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters.

For a sheep, green grass and still water constitute the basic needs of sustenance. The title sentence told us we shall not want, and then right off the first section tells us how those needs are simply supplied.

But notice the context of peace and rest in which these needs are met—*he maketh me to lie down*. The psalm starts with rest, which is a biblical ordering. In Genesis we hear, *there was evening, there was morning the first day*. And we start our week on Sunday the traditional day of rest.

This next section is about the life of faith.

HE restoreth my soul. HE leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake

Notice the basic needs first, and then only the life of faith--Just like in Maslow's hierarchy.

The life of faith is about spiritual wholeness and right living. And spiritual wholeness is required first in order to be able to live rightly. Our souls are restored. And then right living, which is not something we can expect to accomplish by ourselves. We cannot walk rightly apart from the shepherd. We must be guided.

Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

Here is existential threat—it is death, in all its forms and with all its destructive wake. Notice it is a whole valley—at once vast and closed in. This is a profoundly accurate image of the journey of grief. The shepherd does not prevent us from journeying this valley. Indeed all of us will, whether by facing our own death or that of a loved one. But with the company of the shepherd we need not fear evil in the valley. Death's valley we will walk, but death and evil are not the same.

And to protect us, the Shepherd carries Rod and staff, traditional tools of the trade. The rod would have been a straight stick with a knob at the end, used to fend off predators, to beat back brambles, or to correct a wayward sheep. The Staff is the quintessential shepherd's tool, the one with a large hook. It has all the functions of a rod, but also could be used to gently hook and guide a sheep back to the flock and to safely.

The heavenly table is next: Thou preparest....

The table is prepared. A picture of gracious hospitality. It is set in the very presence of the ones who have been my enemies. This echoes Jesus' own table habits. This is the heavenly banquet. It is the table set when former enemies sup together, all enmity ceases, animosities are set to peace.

Table, anointing and cup. Think about hospitality and our two sacraments: the table prepared is hospitality, the anointing an echo of baptism, and the cup a recapitulation of communion.

And here is our conclusion, --literally, our conclusion, for it tells us how our lives will play out until the end...

From here on, God promises that goodness and mercy shall follow us, and that we will dwell with God. This is our conclusion, our end, our purpose and our promised outcome.

Let's try from beginning to end... The Lord is.....days of my life.

Amen