

Today is a beautiful day. A wonderful day for experiencing our God in the wakening creation, in song and prayer, in scripture, and in celebration.

Today we are taking a small break from the retelling and teaching on the life of Christ – instead we will be looking to some of the songs and poetry familiar to Jesus and his disciples – found in the Psalms. Jesus often used these familiar metaphors in his own teaching – and they are good metaphors for us today too.

Today I want to reflect, simply, on the ways of deepening our relationship with God, but I will use the Psalmist's nature metaphors– of Sheep, Deer and Trees.

Sheep

Psalm 23 – Complete Jewish Bible

Yahweh is my shepherd; I lack nothing.

² He has me lie down in grassy pastures,

he leads me by quiet water,

³ he restores my inner person.

He guides me in right paths
for the sake of his own name.

⁴ Even if I pass through death-dark ravines,

I will fear no disaster; for you are with me;

your rod and staff reassure me.

⁵ You prepare a table for me,

even as my enemies watch;

you anoint my head with oil

from an overflowing cup.

⁶ Goodness and grace will pursue me

every day of my life;

and I will live in the house of *Yahweh*

for years and years to come.

What's it like to be a sheep? The sheep is all about relationship.

The LORD is my Shepherd... We've heard the psalm read today and many of us here can say it by heart.

Did you know that domesticated sheep really aren't that bright? While together they are strong (would not want to stand in the way of a sheep stampede) – and fairly fast – they can also turn at a dime. They move as if by group-think – like a school of fish – a hive mind, as it were. It's hard, when they're running, to see who's the leader and who are the followers. They panic about the silliest things – like a bee or a loud noise. And when they get separated from their flock and panic – they either freeze or run in circles. They don't know what to do. They really need each

other. However, many times on my hike I saw sheep in the grassy fields calm and still. They lacked nothing to eat or drink; they lacked no shelter from the weather.

When we refer to people being like sheep, we're not usually speaking positively. We're usually implying blind following without discernment. And when we say someone looks "sheepish" it's not usually a complement, but rather a statement explaining a look of embarrassment. Yet knowing this about sheep, I'm always amazed that sheep is so often used as a metaphor for God's people.

It is true that David, the writer of the psalm was a shepherd; he knew all the sheep's negative and dare I say silly attributes. Yet David also knew what it meant to love these silly creatures – to protect them and to provide for them because not doing so would lead to, not only the sheep's danger, but also the loss of livelihood from the sheep's products – wool and meat.

Psalm 23 is, in truth, more about the shepherd than the sheep. This shepherd doesn't care for the sheep because he can use them as a commodity. He cares for the sheep because he loves them in all their silly neediness. The shepherd takes the sheep to the new tender grass and sweet water. The shepherd leads the sheep in the right paths, keeping them from getting lost, or attacked. The shepherd leads the sheep right where they need to be to get what they need to survive - still waters, green fields, right paths, shelter and safety.

What is the only task of the sheep in Psalm 23? To follow. To follow the shepherd. To lay down and rest when it's time to allow oneself to be restored. To walk in right paths, paths of justice – why? Because the shepherd is showing the way. And yes, the shepherd even shows the way through the darkest valley, and even there, the sheep are not alone.

Even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the sheep are not alone. The shepherd has a purpose: The shepherd takes the sheep from pastures that are now eaten up and barren, where food is scarce and the land is parched, to new lush, green meadows. But to get there, the shepherd and the sheep must pass through the valley.

The sheep don't understand this. All they see is the steep cliffs on both sides of the valley, the numerous caves and rocks and crevices that are perfect hiding places for animals of prey - and for people who meant to harm passing travellers. Sounds echo and amplify in the valley, and, because sheep are sheep – every one of these sounds makes them even more skittish. The sheep don't know why the shepherd is leading them through the valley - but the shepherd knows. The shepherd has a reason; a purpose and the sheep have learned to trust the shepherd.

For us, what is the Valley of the Shadow of Death? It is those terrifying, dark, lonely, frightening times in life -- times of sickness, tragedy, emotional stress, tension, economic disaster, loneliness, when God may seem far away and where life seems to bite us hard. We may wonder, "where is God?" In these times it is good to remember that we need to go through the valley of the shadow of death, in order to enter into a deeper relationship with God.

And oh what treat awaits us on the other side – be it through death, or be it through our darkest despair, God has set for us a feast. Our food on the other side of this valley is no longer quiet

waters and grass, but more rich; a feast of delight. Where we are given more grace than we ever deserved, and our cups overflow!

When we find ourselves in a dark valley, we might be first tempted to fight our way out of it, or to turn the other way and run. But all we really know is that our task is to keep following the shepherd.

Pause

Deer

Psalm 42 from the Tanakh – Jewish/English translation of the Bible

²Like a hind crying for water,
my soul cries for You, O God;
³my soul thirsts for God, the living God;
O when will I come to appear before God!
⁴My tears have been my food day and night;
I am ever taunted with, “Where is your God?”
⁵When I think of this, I pour out my soul:
how I walked with the crowd, moved with them,
the festive throng, to the House of God
with joyous shouts of praise.
⁶Why so downcast, my soul,
why disquieted within me?
Have hope in God;
I will yet praise Him
for His saving presence.
⁷O my God, my soul is downcast;
therefore I think of You
in this land of Jordan and Hermon,
in Mount Mizar,
⁸where deep calls to deep
in the roar of Your cataracts;
all Your breakers and billows have swept over me.

What’s it like to be a deer?

Israel is an arid land – with patches of desert – and places with more fertility. Obviously all creatures prefer to live near water and that includes people. Towns, villages, cities, homesteads all are built around wells or streams of water. Water is used for eating, bathing, irrigation. Because of the climate, water is precious and people in the desert know how thirst feels.

Its likely wild animals, like deer, know how thirst feels too.

Psalm 42 starts by saying “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God”. It’s all well and good to say that we are sheep following our shepherd, but what if we lose

sight of that shepherd? What about those moments when we are like a wild deer on the arid plain, thirsting for water, longing for water, but not sure where the river went.

The Psalmist longs for God, a deep thirst that is all tangled up with a hope that the thirst will be quenched. The Psalmist reflects, “I remember how I went with the throng and led everyone else in worship in God’s house...those were the days, the days when I was sure; the days when I felt close to God. I can’t figure out why my soul is cast down right now. But, I hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

If we are like deer, we may need to travel through the wilderness of life without always knowing when our next glimpse of life-giving water will happen; when we will next hear a word from God. Sheep follow the shepherd wherever they’re led – even through darkness to fresh new grass. Deer are always alert and have their eyes open to witness both the danger and the goodness around them. Deer know where to find the living water – they can smell it – and they won’t rest until their thirst is quenched.

Do not be afraid of the longing that keeps you searching. In the Gospel of John: 7:37-38 we read: While Jesus was standing in the temple, he cried out: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me,³⁸ and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Pause

Trees

Psalm 1 – Lexhem English Bible

Blessed are they who do not walk in the advice of the wicked;
nor stand in the way of sinners;
nor sit in the assembly of mockers.

Instead, they take delight in the in the law of Yahweh, and meditates on the law of Yahweh day and night.

And so, they are like a tree planted by streams of water
that gives its fruit in its season;
its leaf also does not wither.

Therefore all that they do prospers.

Not so the wicked.

Instead, they are like the chaff that the
wind scatters.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for Yahweh knows the ways of the righteous,
but the ways of the wicked will perish.

Psalm 1 compares the faithful and righteous to a tree planted by streams of water. A tree that sends her roots deep down and touches that vein of water and finds in it nourishment to grow and not wither, and to yield her fruit in its season.

The Judean date palm is one tree that could fit the description in Psalm 1. These trees can survive the hot, arid climate of Palestine, but only if they have an ample water supply. In ancient times, forests of date palms hugged the banks of the Jordan River, from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. They were an important source of food, medicine, shelter, and wine. One tree could produce about 200 pounds of dates per year. But only if they were connected to a source of water. Now-a-days ancient olive orchards, along with their people, are threatened by encroaching settlements and their subsequent diversion of the ground water supply in Palestine.

We are like a tree that yields its fruit in its season when we answer God's invitation to discipleship. When we send our roots down on a path to the living water then fruits of justice, compassion, and peace are just some of the fruit that are born from our relationship with Christ.

The Psalm says "Blessed are they who do not walk in the advice of the wicked; ... Instead, they take delight in the in the law (teaching) of Yahweh, and meditate on the law of Yahweh day and night." The Hebrew word for meditate implies murmuring and mumbling; God's Word being continually on our lips. Everything we say and everything we are becomes part of the life flowing through us.

We read that "Not so the wicked. Instead, they are like the chaff that the wind scatters." When not connected to that rich soil and to that constant stream of water the tree withers. When we're not in a relationship with God, we start holding onto anything around us – and we forget the healthy fruit of love and righteousness we once produced.

Psalm 1 reminds us that we need the guidance that God has given us, which we recognize in the words of Scripture, in the life of Jesus, and in the leading of the Holy Spirit as we encounter new questions all throughout our lives.

In John 12:33, Jesus says "A tree is known by its fruit." And the fruit reflects the skill and the care of the grower. A tree planted in the fertile soil of God's garden has roots deep in God's teaching and is nourished by the streams of living water – water that gives life and is fresh from God.

Like a sheep, we choose to trust and follow where God leads us – even through dark times. Like a deer, we keep our eyes open - always searching and yearning for God's living water - even through dry dusty seasons. And, like a tree, planted and rooted deeply in the garden of God, we thrust our roots to that life- giving food and bear such delicious fruit.

This is my prayer for you. That you too would heed God's call to follow – trusting God to lead you to what you need, to yearn for and relentlessly seek out that living water to drink deeply and bear good fruit – worthy to be served to our God.