

CRIBB<S>NOTE – APRIL 11, 2008

Psalm 23 is such a familiar Scripture. It is recited at funerals as a source of inspiration and hope during periods of deep grief. Psalm 23 provides an image of a loving, kind shepherd who cares for the defenseless sheep. Their needs are simple but they can't take care of themselves. Water to drink, green pasture land to eat and live, and safe passage are all sheep require. Yet, they need a shepherd to protect them and provide their every need.

Although this passage is usually perceived as a masculine figure who takes good care of the sheep, the actual tasks of the shepherd portray a mother, one who nurtures and nourishes her flock. Mother as the good shepherd is clearly a more accurate image of the one who stays, provides, and protects her sheep. She sets the table and makes sure there is plenty for everyone. Here, the image shifts to one who hosts a feast and attends to the needs of her guests. It may remind us of Martha, Mary's sister, who insists on properly preparing to serve visitors and strangers. She toils in the kitchen while Mary sits at Jesus' feet. Martha scolds Mary for failing to complete her responsibilities as a good hostess; one who provides hospitality.

For those of us who reside in a nation that is affluent and holds an abundant array of goods and wares, it may be difficult to imagine life less satisfying. Although our history includes the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma, too many of us have either forgotten those hard-scrambled days or were not born during that era. Others of us may have escaped the wretched uncertainty of a next meal or an insufficient paycheck. We just don't know what it is like to lack food, water, and comfort. Still, there may be some among us who have a tremendous fear of losing our possessions or experiencing the harshness of poverty and dependency.

It is ironic Psalm 23 is believed to have been written by David, the second king of Israel, who had wealth and power. Yet, he suffered a depth of despair and anguish that required him to cry out to God. Only God could give him comfort, peace, and a sense of well being. Only God is the Good Shepherd who carried him safely to still waters, green pastures, and 'through the valley of the shadow of death.' The king who 'had it all' still needed the salvation only God could provide.

How do you read this Scripture? Does it speak to you or for you? Who is the shepherd?

While difficult moments can send us to our knees, there is never a time when we do not need the Good Shepherd. The psalmist says, "You are with me." Only a delusional person thinks s/he can make it through life alone without help. We need one another and all of us need God.

40 days of Lent begins a period of meditation that leads to the Cross. 40 days of preparation follows Christ's Resurrection and 10 more days of waiting comes after his Ascension. There is uncertainty, fear, disappointment and grief that fill the human soul throughout this sacred period that defines the Christian faith.

This is a time when Psalm 23 has particular meaning. It is a prayer of assurance amid anticipation, expectation, and anxiety. Only the Good Shepherd can bring us to that moment of promise when "God restores my soul and leads me in right paths for the sake of God's name."

Now is when we learn to know life as abundant through Jesus, our Christ. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of God my whole life long." Amen.