

The Good Shepherd Revives and Renews My Life

Psalms 23:2-3a *and* II Samuel 16:5-14

May 06, 2018

Ted V. Foote, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, TX

Until after I turned three years old, my family lived on a small sheep ranch in the northern part of Central Texas's Coryell County. My great-grandfather Foote was our family's first rancher with sheep in the early 1880s. I've said before that literally my first memory in life is watching 100 or more sheep gathering at the concrete watering trough near the windmill about forty yards from my bedroom window on the north side of our small house. In late 1956, though, my dad and mom moved our family 16 miles into Gatesville, where by parents both had "regular work." My dad leased the house on the ranch to the family who managed the sheep for the next three years as the great of drought of 1951 to 1957 finally ended.

How difficult was that drought? In 2012, a man who was 74 years old remembered a day in 1955 when, as an 18 year old, he was plowing in Tom Green County, outside San Angelo. He saw a dust storm on the northern horizon coming so fast he knew he could not get back to the farmhouse. He stopped the tractor and lay down in a furrow with his hat over his head to filter air for breathing. When the storm passed, he returned home to find his family's chickens, turkeys, and guineas dead in the barnyard and around the house. He tells: "They had to open their mouth to breathe. The dust in the air accumulated in their breathing passages, and they all suffocated." Pretty difficult. ("How One Drought Changed Texas Agriculture Forever: National Public Radio," narrative text by John Burnett; <https://www.npr.org/2012/07/07/155995881/how-one-drought-changed-Texas-agriculture-forever>)

In spite of my pre-school experience of the 1950s Texas drought, by the time I was six years old and first remember hearing and learning the 23rd Psalm, I thought not of that life-saving, windmill-pumped from a moderately deep well into a drinking-trough for sheep water in the mid-1950s. Instead, after three years of living in town, my mind was able to picture where a draw or creek has been dammed up, and cool or sun-warmed water has pooled at a depth of three to six feet. "The Good Shepherd leads me beside the still waters." Having forgotten my parents' worry in the mid-1950s that the water-table might eventually drop lower than our well's pumping capacity, and both the family and the sheep would face a shortage of not enough water in the livestock trough or the house, I now realize that only considering Psalm 23's second verse literally – "beside the still waters" – is considering it too narrowly. The writer of the psalm intends that readers consider the psalm broadly rather than literally and narrowly.

Faced with an advancing rebel force led by his son Absalom, and fearing the consequences of being "walled in" during a siege, King David led a retreat of loyalists out a back-gate of Jerusalem. The story written in Second Samuel 16:5-14 describes how, as the loyalists' distance from the back-side of Jerusalem gradually increased, a man appeared on a ridge above them, throwing rocks and cursing the King. David recognized the man as Shimei, a cousin of David's predecessor, King Saul. When the leader of the King's "security detail" asked if the King would like for him to take a small group to the top of the ridge in order to capture and kill Shimei, King David said, "No. My son is in rebellion against me, attempting to trap me within the walls of the capital. One loud protestor – who hates me because his cousin is not still alive as King – matters little as we attempt to get into the open country-side." Then the story notes how, when arriving at the Jordan River to camp for the night – at the end of a nail-biteingly stressful day when he was the target of rocks thrown and curses shouted, David's downcast perspective was refreshed and renewed. The Hebrew word describing King David's life being refreshed and renewed at the close of a Migraine headache-ly- stressful day is the verb-form of "the essence of life/ the soul" which God's more-than-adequate, gracious Spirit creates as "breath" within. It's how and why (at Psalm 23, verse 3a) the King James Version – in 1611 –

translated, “The Good Shepherd restoreth my soul / my ‘nephesh’/ my humanness given by God.” Going back to the “Adam and Eve Creation Story” beginning in chapter 2 of Genesis, it’s the word – at verse 7 – used to describe God’s method of completing the human being: “then the Lord God formed the human being of the dust from the ground and breathed into the nostrils the breath of life and the human became a living being / a ‘nephesh’.”

The picture on the bulletin cover today is a photo taken during last year’s Peru mission trip of sheep along the highway between Cusco and the Andean continental divide. The elevation where the photo is taken is 13,000 + feet above sea level. Sheep are sheep, and people are people. I spent more time than is necessary on internet research attempting to figure out exactly what breed of sheep these were on the slopes of the Andes. I’m fairly certain they are Criollo sheep, which are raised in South America for their meat and their wool. They might be a hybrid breed – the Assaf sheep – which are meat, milk, and wool sheep, but I think they are Criollos. For our purposes of exploring Psalm 23, their exact breed does not matter anymore than a breed or ethnic type of human beings matters to God. Sheep are sheep, and people are people. The shepherds of these particular sheep were right there keeping them out of the middle of the highway when vehicles approached at traveling speed, but neither the sheep pictured here nor their shepherds have an easy life. The rocky slope seen in the photo does not mean there is no grass or water in the area. The sheep and shepherds actually are crossing the paved road, moving up the slope, headed to some grass and water in the area beyond the highway itself. While it is certainly true that livestock at lower altitudes walk from grazing area to grazing area and water source to water source, life in Peru and elsewhere (!) is hard. For people in Peru there are no HEBs, Krogers, or Wal-Marts. And if water is not close to a snowpack or a rainwater cistern, it can be polluted by mining, petroleum, industrial, or sewage by-products. Drinking polluted water compromises and attacks a healthy body. While necessary, clean water can be unavailable.

Neither local people anywhere, nor visiting partners from somewhere else, can eliminate suffering and threats, whether the suffering and threats are in-process or are looming. The threat of one person throwing rocks and shouting curses may not rise to the actual or potential harm-level of armed terrorists, the pollution of a water source, the devastation of a rainfall drought, the plague of a rampant infectious disease, a desperation of an economic crash, the high-jacking of Constitutional Democracy, the pain of grief, the assault of a potentially mortal disease, or the fracturing of a person’s family or life-situation. King David was correct in telling his security forces that the threat of one person throwing rocks and shouting curses does not rise to the actual or potential harm-level of other threats and harming forces; but the refreshing and renewing of our lives we all need, day by day.

You’ve heard John Newton’s testimonial words sung this morning: “Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come. ’Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far; and grace will lead me home.”

King David kept ducking the rocks Shimei threw. He tried to focus his thinking through the curses Shimei hurled. When he arrived at the Jordan River in the evening, the man whose family and nation seemed broken beyond repair experienced God’s Spirit restoring his soul/ his humanness with the very sacred breath that’s given by the Almighty to one and all, in every place on this globe, in every day that moves toward night and in every night that moves toward day, including right here again this morning – restoring, renewing, and refreshing even your life and mine from grace, that we might share such grace through our lives as God’ Spirit restores, renews, and refreshes us. David was in Jerusalem in the morning, fleeing for his safety on the road out of town in the middle of the day, and at a distant riverbank in the evening. Tomorrow he would be somewhere else. Yet God was in all those places to accompany, to shepherd, to restore, renew, and refresh him. So it is with God for each and every person, each and every day. – All honor and praise be to God.