

## The Good Shepherd Prepares a Table and Anoints with Oil

Psalm 23:5

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In 1980, I was serving as an associate pastor in San Antonio when I received in the mail a brief note written by my intern supervisor from two years before. It said, “Ted, if you read not another book this year, read Professor Samuel Terrien’s recently published Old Testament theology book, entitled, ‘The Elusive Presence.’ Best regards, George.”

You may not know Sam Terrien’s name, but you know the results of his research, thought, and work. His book, “The Elusive Presence,” explains a way of considering God which notes the importance, yet the difficulty, of discerning how God relates to persons and to history. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and in the United States, the predominant and preferred Protestant Biblical theology method to understand God’s presence was through a historical covenant God establishes, beginning with Abraham. Even the 11 windows in this sanctuary, built in 1967, marvelously tell the story of God’s covenant in many manifestations. The gift of baptism we celebrate today has deep roots in “covenant theology,” meaning that God’s promise is proclaimed and “advertised” when we celebrate the promise – based in grace – that God cares, and cleanses, and heals for new life. Sam Terrien does not argue against the importance of the theme of covenant so much as he adds to the picture of crucial Biblical themes and interpretive methods. As a specialist in the book and themes of Job and of the Bible’s “Wisdom” teachings, Dr. Terrien argues that the covenant theme may be real, but the covenant theme is “macro” and “big picture” in its claim. Even at a baptism, like this morning, the words spoken mostly convey a message of God’s promise which started Creation and continues with legitimacy “from beyond,” we might say almost like a vapor trail in the sky indicates that a jet flew over and crossed the landscape where you and I are standing. If that is our only way of understanding God in relation to creation and history, we will fail to take seriously how the God of the “fly-over vapor-trail covenant-evidence” may actually “land” and draw near to God’s people amid our experiences of suffering, uncertainty, doubt, struggle, and relationships in personal and real-time contexts. Sam Terrien’s contribution to Biblical theology has been in his argument that God’s character and presence have an elusive nature, sometimes seeming closer, sometimes seeming farther away. That’s not bad. It’s the way it is. For Christians, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, this is exemplified in the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, said to embody God’s covenant alive among God’s people, having “landed” for a life existence and a modeling of love that suffers in life and death with ultimate trust every day and all the way through death.

One of the first times I looked at Dr. Terrien’s book after my former supervisor suggested its purchase, I turned to his comments on Psalm 23, where he notes that a person might think how “the “shepherd and pasture theme” of Psalm 23, after verse 4, fairly abruptly shifts “to the banquet hall.” Not necessarily, he says. One role of a shepherd, if working alone, is to walk ahead of the flock upon entering a new grazing area in order to survey the new pasture for threats and liabilities to the flock. Are there thorn-bushes, rocky areas, crevices, dens for snakes, underbrush for predators, etc.? If more than one shepherd happens to be on duty, this work might be delegated to a second “scouting” shepherd, while the first remains with the flock in their present grazing location. Thus the words, “Thou preparest a table before me” – the grazing table, which was a pasture – “in the presence of mine enemies” – thorns, rocks, crevices, snakes, predators. When a sheep, in the course of a day, happened to become injured, the shepherd functioned like a

veterinarian or a human parent of a child: anointing a wound with salve or oil to seal the wound and minimize further infection, even to prevent insects from crawling on the skin to enter ears or nose. “Thou anointest my head with oil.” Sam Terrien believed that we can sense something essential of God’s elusive presence among the very people with whom we live and work and worship day by day and across the decades of our lives. God’s elusive presence drawing near is not limited to events like baptism or celebrations like Christmas or Easter, or even each Sunday. This “something” of God’s presence “crops up” in our homes, work-places, centers of learning, and locations of leisure. This “something” of God’s presence can be perceived when surveying a beautiful landscape, seascape, or skyscape, but MUST include perceiving God’s presence among God’s people: in their suffering, uncertainty, doubt, struggles, and relationships (pgs.332-335).

Sam Terrien encourages our considering how there is likely a closer distance than we often think between a sheep and a good shepherd and between a person and other people and God. We are related to one another, and we realize God’s presence more significantly and powerfully when we consider how God is the Good Shepherd mysteriously and elusively among us – not present because we demand or command, but present because the Shepherd is the way the Shepherd is, unwilling to be captured or characterized by our own worst tendencies: our partisanship, our tribalism, our narrow self-definitions of who is most valuable. These are “existential enemies,” philosophical enemies which give us excuses not to sit at table and cooperate and grow with one another. What if sheep said to one another: “Your ears and face are black or brown, while mine are white. You must not be the best kind of sheep. Your hair is thin and wispy while my wool is thick, so you must not be the best kind of sheep. I live on this side of the railroad tracks, or the river, or the ocean, and you live on that side of the railroad tracks, or the river, or the ocean.” The best we know, sheep don’t say that; but we know how people do. Sadly. The “mine enemies” may not be other sheep whom I think are so different from me, yet may be enemies which are my own poisonous beliefs and predatory attitudes, which keep me from trusting and believing that the Good Shepherd intends more for me and others than we may desire for ourselves: more reconciliation, more shared life, more health and wholeness as a flock moving together.

In 1989, John Irving wrote the novel, “A Prayer for Owen Meany.” Nine years later a movie, related to the book, was made, entitled, “Simon Birch.” Yet, due to the endings of the two being quite different in each one’s context, Mr. Irving insisted that the movie’s main character have a different name from the novel. Both, however, follow a theme exploring “What will be Owen Meany’s or Simon Birch’s destiny?” We could ask the same question about our own lives, or about young Noah James – baptized today. “Destiny” almost always looks past the day-to-day of life and past God’s elusive presence continually calling us and preparing a table before us in the midst of our enemies – including those enemies which are our own self-damaging attitudes, habits, customs, and policies. “Destiny” also looks past the oil with which we are anointed.

In certain Christian traditions, the water of baptism is “sealed” with an application of oil precisely for the symbolism that The Good Shepherd, who takes the sheep in arms, anoints the head with oil. For healing all of one’s days. From love for all of one’s days. Let us not be so pre-occupied with fear, or self-protection, or with destiny that we fail to share the pasture deeply respecting one and all – because the Good Shepherd has prepared the table whereupon we graze and dwell, for us to graze, dwell, and grow respectfully day-by-day in community with others, ever being made new by God’s elusive and transforming presence. Then “whatever destiny is” will take care of itself. – All honor and praise be to God.