

2025 05 11 – *Shepherd God*

Scripture: John 10:22-30 (*The Inclusive Bible*)
Psalms 23

I grew up in a family that wasn't really into hugging or verbally expressing our feelings. Our parents weren't ones to say, "I love you" out loud. But, even as a child, I knew that I was loved. I knew that I and my seven siblings were all loved. I knew that, not because of what my parents' said, but because of what they did and how I felt when I was with them. My mother, in particular, worked incredibly hard to ensure that we were well cared for. She was a beacon of safety and stability in what was sometimes a pretty chaotic household.

Mom was the one we ran to with our scraped knees and elbows. She was the one who dealt with hurt feelings and torrents of tears. Our mother was the keeper of the Kleenex, the band aid, and the Raleigh's antiseptic salve. She cooked all our meals, washed our clothes, kept our schedules and made sure we had studied for the next math test. Even in my forties, my mother was the one I turned to when I needed support during the final year of my Divinity degree. She was there for me: feeding me and providing me the safe space I needed to complete my assignments. It was through my Mom that I learned that true love is expressed not just in words but even more clearly in action.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus is sharing a similar lesson. He is in Jerusalem for the Feast of Dedication, the Jewish festival that we now call Hanukkah. He is walking in the Temple, in an area called Solomon's Porch,

when the temple authorities surround him and ask , “How long are you going keep us in suspense? If you really are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Jesus patiently explains that he has already answered their question. Maybe he hasn't spoken the words, but his work, his healing, his teaching, his preaching are all the acts of someone who has been sent, who has been anointed by God. And that's what the word Messiah means, it means “Anointed One.”

Jesus goes on to say, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” Just like our mothers, our fathers, or other parent figures in our lives, Jesus is explaining to these Jewish leaders that he doesn't need to make a statement, he doesn't need to call himself the Messiah in order for his followers to know who he is and whose he is. In other words, he is saying, “If you listen to my voice and learn from my teaching, if you allow my healing message to enter your heart, if you allow my healing touch to soothe your wounds, then you will know that I am from Abba God, and that Abba God is in me.” Abba is a more familiar or intimate Aramaic term for father; we might translate it as dad, or daddy.

Jesus is saying, “follow me, listen to me, watch me, get to know the Sacred Love that lives within me.” And to do this he is using the image of a shepherd. In fact, in the verses just previous to today's reading he even calls himself, the Good Shepherd. Jesus uses this image because it is a profession that is familiar to the people of Galilee and Judea. It is an image that was used in the Hebrew Scriptures, the scrolls that Jesus and the other rabbis would read in the synagogues.

In fact, their most revered monarch, King David, was himself a shepherd.

Today's second scripture passage, the 23rd Psalm, is attributed to David. This Jewish King was also a poet and a musician. There are many translation of this his most famous psalm. The one best known by many of you is probably the King James Version originally published in 1611 and the translation that we sang this morning is from the Scottish Psalter of 1650.

The 23rd Psalm is one of the most well-known and also most beloved scripture passages. It is often requested at funerals and at the bedside of someone who is dying. It is psalm that reminds us that we are not alone, that God is with us and that God cares for us. It reminds us that God's love is like the care that a shepherd gives their sheep. It is like the care that a parent gives their child:

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;
He makes me down to lie in pastures green;
he leadeth me, the quiet waters by.

That Shepherd's love is available to us all. As Jesus said, all we have to do is open ourselves to the healing power that is the Risen Christ, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, the Spirit of Love. David had obviously listened and experienced that love. He understood at the deepest level that he was not alone. He had felt that love, that compassion, that strength that was with him even in the most difficult of times and he knew that it would never leave him.

Scholars have argued that Jesus' words to the Temple authorities were exclusive. That he was suggesting that if someone couldn't hear his voice then they would be left out. But his words could just as easily be seen as an invitation, "Come and see, come and feel, come and experience. I am telling you that hearing the words, 'I am the Messiah' is not enough. If you want to understand me, to really know me, to connect with my Abba God, then come and follow me."

God doesn't have just one exclusive club, one denomination, or even one religion. God's love is unconditional and everlasting. I believe that we are loved by the Holy Mystery even when we are unable to accept or receive that love. Jesus' life and teachings offer us one way to reach out and truly experience the Spirit of Love. To know God's love as we know the love of our mothers and fathers or the love of others who have parented us in our lives. But, as our friends in other faiths can tell us, Jesus is not the only way. There are many paths to the love of the Shepherd God.

So today, on this Mother's Day, on this Christian Family Sunday, on this day when we have celebrated the sacrament of baptism. Let us all rejoice in this beautiful image of God as parent, shepherd, protector, healer and caregiver. And let us open our hearts and our minds to the experience of the Holy Mystery's transforming love in our lives.

May it be so. Amen.