

# Christ's Flock

Psalm 23 & 1<sup>st</sup> John 3:1-7

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Hudson United Methodist Church  
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Last Wednesday for our Evensong prayer service (5 p.m. before Wednesday suppers at 5:30), I chose Psalm 23 as our psalm of the day. For our reflection question I asked, “What memories do you have of this psalm?”

Before you go further, why not answer that question for yourself here:

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Some of us remembered memorizing Psalm 23 in Sunday school. But one special shared memory inspires me today. A grandfather took his grandchildren on his knee and lovingly read the Bible out loud to them. As a young man, he served in World War I and had prayed “I will fear no evil for thou art with me” in foxholes during combat. As grandparent, he took time to share his faith in a way that made memories with his Boomer grandchildren.

Were you blessed as a child to learn this prayer that appreciates God’s care for us in a loving way? Did someone in your family treat you as if you were a precious lamb to be herded as part of their flock? When either sheep or children are herded they are protected by a guardian, children by parents and other older humans, sheep by shepherds of various varieties and older sheep. Were you a child who was herded?

I was herded in a flock that included my parents, my grandma, my neighbors, and a German shepherd dog named Tippy. Among my neighbors was Miss Grindy, whose fiancé died in World War I. Her children were the third graders she taught including both Daddy and me. She also oversaw our Sunday school Bible memorization program, where I was one of her weaker students.

It wasn’t until I was both a seminarian and a mother herding two young boys assisted by a German shepherd named Sheplie that I realized not only if the Lord is

our shepherd we are always his sheep. I realized all humans are as much like the Lord as both my young sons and I were like my German shepherds.

Humans and sheep have a lot in common. Both have parents who protect them when they are young. Both humans and sheep live communally and need herding throughout our lives. . When we leave childhood for adulthood, we never stop being our parents' child or lose our need for herding. All humans need herding from God and other humans in their community.

This truth pulls us from a psalm composed by Jesus' ancestor to our other scripture, a letter written by Jesus' beloved disciple. John is widely considered to be the youngest of Christ's first twelve disciples. We call John the "beloved disciple" because while he never referred to himself by name, he did call himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved." (John 21:20) When John was with Jesus at the crucifixion, he was about the same age as a young private in combat on the front line of a war. When he wrote his farewell letters to the Church, to us, he was as old as a grandparent taking a beloved grandchild on his knee.

John wrote to us, "See what kind of love the Father has given us in that we should be called God's children, and that is what we are!" (1<sup>st</sup> John 3:1) John never meant that as Christians we are forever innocent children who never mature past the age of 12. John meant that when we were adopted by God because of Christ's sacrifice, we remain God's children no matter how long we live. No matter our age, we are still part of Christ's flock.

One of my shepherds is Rev. Dr. Archie Smith, Jr. He was my faculty advisor in my Master of Arts program. Our shared academic area is pastoral care, he is famous for his focus on black church experiences. But at Pacific School of Religion, we were members of the same flock. A seminary is a kind of church of pastors within the greater Church. Our shared flocks' shared value for both reading Scripture and serving the Church was the phrase "Context matters."

Dr. Smith was old enough to have been my baby sitter. He served an African American church in the Berkely flats, a multiracial neighborhoods where many service industry workers lived. My church was in a suburb that had been formed before desegregation where many families lived with stay-at-home parents fully supported financially by the other parent with a white-collar 9 to 5 job.

My research was on the importance of table fellowship for children in a healthy local church. As a suburban mom, I had solid social research about the parallel between church dinners and family suppers as good practice for Christian parents. Dr. Smith worked with families who worked when they could because poverty and racism often made employment hard to find. In his church, family suppers were often impossible with shift work, such as cooking and serving meals at fine dining establishments where my neighbors brunched after church. In our time together, Dr. Smith knew me well enough to argue that my initial thesis would exclude the child I had been from growing up as a Christian because my dad worked shifts and my mom was a nurse who was on call full time in a rural hospital.

Dr. Smith won the argument, and not just because he was the professor while I was the student. He won the argument because all families need the companionship local churches provide. No matter our age or our social status, all Christians are children of God and members of the Lord's flock. We welcome each other because we are equally welcomed by our Lord.

Our faith ancestor, John wrote in his farewell letter to us, "Beloved, we are God's children now, even as we do not know what the Lord is leading us to be." (1<sup>st</sup> John 3:2, preacher's paraphrase based on several English translations. Those words of love came to us from a grandfather of the church, one who knew even though he was old he was still God's child, who had witnessed Christ's great sacrifice and survived the fall of Jerusalem to share the Good News.

As our faith ancestor, John did not stop being God's child. As our faith ancestor, David, the shepherd of his father's sheep (1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 16: 11-13) did not stop being part of God's flock when he became the king of Israel.

This week, please think about the other sheep in your flock, both in our church and in your home. Who are the younger sheep you need to share your faith with as well? Who are the sheep in our flock that care for you as you care for others?

Next week, we will look at another famous sheep passage, the Good Shepherd from John 10:11-18. The Latin word for "shepherd" is "pastor." As your apprentice shepherd, between now and then I encourage you to spend some time memorizing Psalm 23, even if you already did so when you were younger. Here is a method that works for those of us who struggle with memorization. All you need is a sheet of paper, a pencil, an eraser, and a small piece of tape.

1. Find a Bible translation, either in print or on-line, where you have not memorized the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. I use biblegateway.com to look up translations I do not own in print. You can also find a translation you do not own in our church library and copy it there.
2. In pencil, copy that translation onto your sheet of paper. Do not use a printer or a pen, you need to be able to erase words.
3. Tape that copy up in a private place you are in often. A bathroom mirror or wall works well. Leave your eraser nearby.
4. Read it often and after each reading erase a single word. This makes memorizing easy.

For example, as a child I memorized the first verse of Psalm 23 from Daddy's *King James Bible* as "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." But, in *The Common English Bible* we read most often in worship now, David's Hebrew words are translated "The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing." Two faithful translations of the same Hebrew original, for different generations of Christ's flock. As I will copy and tape up the Common English Version, after I read it through the first time I will erase "Shepherd." That is an easy word to remember. The second time through, I would erase a harder word, such as "lack." Then my hand copied in pencil 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm taped up on my bathroom will read "The Lord is my \_\_\_\_\_. I \_\_\_\_ nothing." Filling in the missing words will help my memory.

It works. How do I know? After Miss Grindy retired Mrs. Berg, our new third grade teacher, took over our Sunday school. Instead of making us earn a Bible by memorizing passages from a parent's Bible, she taught us how to memorize verses by erasing words from a chalkboard in class. Both methods have their merits, but Mrs. Berg's approach worked better for me and my parents. Later I adapted it for Bible college and seminary. Since then, I have shared it with many others who struggle to memorize Scripture. It has worked for them too. Please, try this to memorize verses.

Why memorize? Well, like a young soldier in a foxhole or a second shift worker washing restaurant pots and pans, you may find yourself needing God's comforting word and unable to use either a book or a smart phone. The best place to keep God's word close for when you need it is in your heart.

Amen.