

"The Lord is My Mother Shepherd"
C Easter 4; Psalm 23; John 10:22-30
May 12, 2019; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

23 ¹⁻³ God, my shepherd!
I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.
⁴ Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.
⁵ You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.
⁶ Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.

John 10:22-30

NRSV:

²² At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah,^[a] tell us plainly."

²⁵ Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father/Mother's name testify to me; ²⁶ but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ What my Mother/Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.^[b]³⁰ The Father and I are one."

FIVE CANDLES

1. For those whose mothers are gone – either recently or long ago.
2. For those who have lost a child –either young or grown—and will grieve forever.
3. For foster parents, step-parents and adoptive mothers.
4. For those who yearned to be mothers.

5. For men who give mothering energy and nurturing care in many way.

PRAEDERVAND – —PRAYER TIME

May divine Love be your shepherd today.

May you not lack any good.

May it make you to lie down in green pastures, and lead you besides still waters.

May Love restore your soul (your spiritual sense).

May it lead you on the paths of right action for Love's sake.

When you walk in the valley of the shadow of death,
May you fear no evil, for truly Love's rod and Love's staff are there to comfort you.

May divine Love lay a table in front of your enemies – all the challenges you are facing.

May divine Love anoint your head with oil and may your cup overflow.

May goodness and mercy accompany you all the days of your life, And may you live in the Presence of divine Love for evermore. ever.

(Pradervand, Pierre. 365 Blessings to Heal Myself and the World: Really Living One's Spirituality in Everyday Life.)

I. MOTHER'S DAY IS HARD

It was hard this week. Looking forward to Mother's Day when my mom is no longer with us on this side of the veil. Many of my friends and relatives, including some of you, are walking through this poignant time—the first Mother's Day without Mom. Or Grandma.

And, I had a *good* relationship with my mom, I thought—what must it be like for those with crazy, mixed emotions about their moms and strained relationships? And the other side of that coin –when our relationships with our children are strained and distant—either emotionally or geographically, that's hard too. I know many people who just wish they could crawl in a hole and disappear for a day.

But, throughout the week, through messages from Creation, friends, the scriptures and my own memories, I came to be profoundly aware, once again, that Mother's Day is *not* a celebration or grief of any *one* thing or relationship. It's not just a Hallmark Day, all sweet and pink and wrapped up with a bouquet of flowers.

For Mother Love and presence is a vast, multi-faceted, countless-chambers-of-the-heart force that is *sacred* and so beyond the stereotypes, that we risk celebrating just one small slice of this great gift, if we are not mindful of its many faces.

So, today, we reframe and reclaim Mother's Day by immersing ourselves in the shepherding love of our Divine Mother. And we ask ourselves, how can we live out these beautiful scriptures—the twenty-third psalm

and the words of Jesus the Good Shepherd, too? How can we revel in the loving presence of the Holy, in all the ways we find it, and in turn, shepherd one another?

For we all have more than one mother. We have Mother Earth and Mother Church, and even Mother Shepherds! More on that in a minute.

II. MOTHERS of BUSYNESS

As we remember our mothers past and present, we can remember their gifts, but also their quirks as well. For we are all quirky. I came across a version of Psalm 23 awhile back that made me laugh out loud, precisely because it spoke to my mother so well. *And* myself!

“The Lord is my Pacesetter.”

For, my mother’s bible, other than the real bible, was a book called, “When I Relax, I Feel Guilty.” She never stopped moving, doing, creating, accomplishing. Even when she’d sit down in her corner chair, she was surrounded by countless to-do lists, piles of papers to sort through, and craft projects to tend to – even into her very late years.

This one’s for you, Mom:

PSALM 23 – JAPANESE VERSION:

The Lord is my pace-setter: I shall not rush.
He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.
He provides me with images of stillness
Which restore my serenity.

He leads me
In the way of efficiency
Through calmness of mind
And His guidance is peace.

Even though I have
A great many things
To accomplish each day,
I will not fret.

For His presence is here.
His timelessness,
His all-importance
Will keep me in balance.

He prepares refreshment and renewal
In the midst of activity
By anointing my mind
With the oil of tranquility.

My cup of joyous energy overflows.
Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruit of
my hours,
For I shall walk in the pace of my Lord
And dwell in His house forever.

III. MOTHER SHEPHERDS

And, now, about that other kind of Shepherd –an Australian Shepherd you might have heard about or met here at church. She liked Clean-up Day, but got more dirty out in the play yard than she did clean! We learned more about our dog, Cheyenne, this week.

Her story is a complex puzzle, and the pieces are coming together little by little, as we talk to various people involved in the rescuing, fostering and raising of this family.

When Cheyenne was rescued from a crate on the top of Monarch Pass, in the cold, she'd just had puppies. One was stillborn and the other three were tiny, eyes not yet open, just five days old. Cheyenne was a very young, inexperienced mother, and very stressed out. She was covered in scabs—guessed to be caused by fights with the other adult dogs, when they tried to come near.

She wasn't eating well or taking care of herself, and she was neglecting the pups at first too. She wouldn't let the foster mom near the pups for over a week –she would nip at her and push away. But, with much love, patience and persistence, the foster mom showed her how to love and care for them *and* herself, and that she, too, was loved and wanted.

Soon, Cheyenne was a loving and caring mom, not just a protective one, and eating right and raising the pups – even the blind and deaf one, whom the others were shunning a bit. When *she* was shown mother love and proper shepherding, she was able to show it in return. But not until then. We have a Good Shepherd of an Aussie kind!

I wonder if *our* Divine Mother Shepherd might find Herself stressed out trying to corral and manage *us* at times. But, She is always fiercely loyal and protective. And *makes* us lie down in green pastures, even when we don't always take such good care of ourselves. And

then, our souls are restored and our cup overflows – with goodness and mercy.

Cheyenne, the mother shepherd, is a good reminder to listen, to trust, and to know the sound of the Voice of love, like Jesus said:

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

On Tuesday, I took her to visit her foster mom for the first time since we adopted her. She kept cowering on my feet when others tried to approach her. But when the Mom came around the counter, she ran into her arms, covered her with kisses and nuzzled into her neck! It was something to see. We don't forget mother love once we've found it!

Her blind and deaf puppy, named Ellie, has also found love and a home. We're all going to get together this week for a reunion –I'll let you know how it goes! Ellie's story, written by the foster mom, is on in the Ark Valley Humane Society newsletter from March, and is posted on the bulletin board.

“When Psalm 23 Shepherded Me”

Rev. Leah Schade

I'll tell you why I think it's so important to have this psalm memorized. Many years ago when my daughter was a restless baby who would not sleep through the night, my husband took her up to his

office on the third floor of our home so I could get some rest. But after she had fallen asleep, as he was bringing her back down to the crib, his foot slipped on the step, and they both fell down the stairs. She slipped from his arms and her head banged against the wall at the bottom of the steps.

As I held her in my arms sitting in the emergency room, I went numb when the doctor told us that she had a fractured skull. We waited for the ambulance to take us to Children's Hospital. With all my seminary training, all the scripture I had read over the years, all the experience I had with pastoral care, only one phrase would come to my mind:

"The Lord is my shepherd."

I just kept repeating those words silently to myself. I needed something to cling to – something to get me through that dark valley, if that was indeed where we were headed. And at that point we just didn't know what was ahead. Those words became my prayer mantra in the days that followed. God's rod and staff were with us when they put the neck brace on her, when she screamed as they did the CAT-scans and x-rays, and during the two long nights we spent in her hospital room. Psalm 23 shepherded me every step of the way.

Thankfully, it turned out that her fracture was neither life-threatening nor brain-damaging. She was going to be okay. But Psalm 23 and I developed a very close

relationship during those days. And I will always be grateful to it for getting me through that very difficult time.

Leah urges us all to absorb this Psalm into our bones. She was made to memorize it as a child in Sunday School, then heard it at funerals and recited it at bedsides with parishioners, as we all have. Like the Lord's Prayer, it writes itself on the hearts of those whose minds no longer remember, and can be tapped from there when needed – at the end of life or anytime.

"Psalm 23 is an intimate reflection on the grace of God. It is the psalm of the sacraments – baptism and communion. It is the psalm of life and death – the dark valley and the house of the Lord. This psalm touches on so many important aspects of our lives and faith. So it is the psalm that each of us should know by heart. Just as we say the Lord's Prayer from memory, so should Psalm 23 be right at the forefront of our minds, ready to shepherd us when we are going through both the joys and sorrows of life.

We need these sacred words to give shape and meaning to our lives. This psalm can frame our experiences within the larger picture of God's loving will for us. Psalm 23, when we learn it by heart, can be the very presence of God shepherding us, restoring us, protecting us, guiding us, and blessing us with goodness and mercy. If you have the opportunity to interact with children or grandchildren, I encourage you to help them learn this psalm, to

memorize this psalm – because it will be one of the greatest gifts you can give them for their lives.”

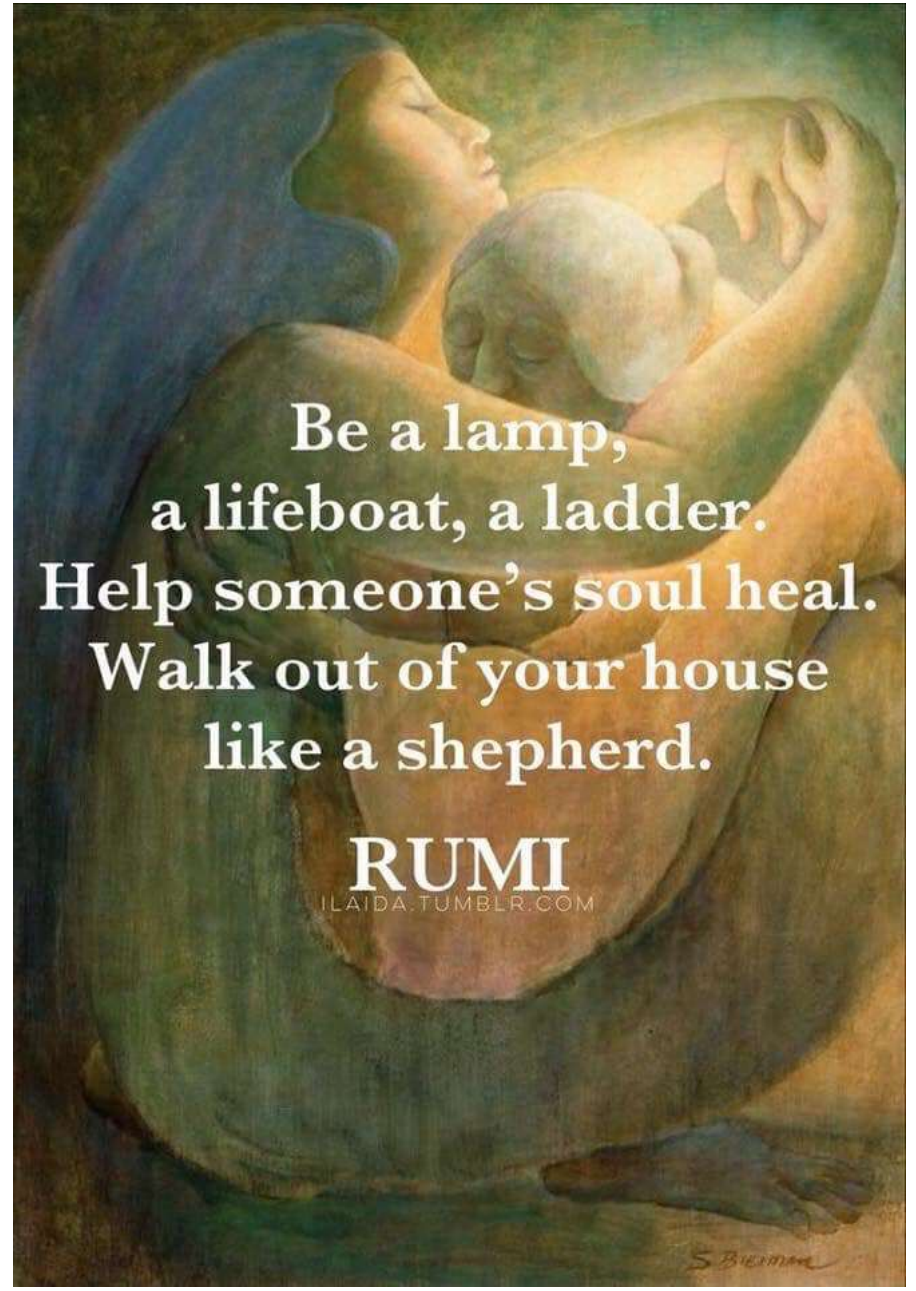
We close with one more. Close your eyes and soak this in –take it to heart. The Lord, our Mother Shepherd, has a message for us, and we give a prayer in response:

A paraphrase of Psalm 23 (Anonymous)

God,
You are enough for us;
you give us rest in soft fields
and beside whispering streams;
you restore and renew us,
and lead us into life-giving ways;

When death and evil come close to us,
you carry us through,
you protect and comfort us;
when others seek to do us harm,
your grace uplifts and provides for us
in public view;
you fill us with your strength
and we enjoy overflowing abundance;

We have confidence that your goodness and compassion
will fill our days,
and we will stay immersed in your life and presence
forever. Amen.



“For Those Who Hurt on Mother’s Day”

By John Pavlovitz

Mother’s Day.

For many people that means flowers and handmade cards and Sunday brunches and waves of laughter. It means celebration and gratitude and warm embraces and great rejoicing. It means resting fully in all that is good about loving and being loved.

But not for some people.

For some it only means tears.

For some it just hurts.

In the hearts of many, this day is a bitter, unsolicited reminder of what was but no longer is, or a heavy holiday of mourning what never was at all.

Maybe it is such a day for you.

It might bring with it the scalding sting of grief for the empty chair around a table.

It might come with choking regret for a relationship that has been severed.

It might be a day of looking around at other mothers and other children, and feeling the unwelcome intrusion of jealousy that comes with comparison.

It might be yet another occasion to lament the mistakes you made or the words you didn’t say or the kindness you never knew.

It might be an annual injury you sustain.

Consider this a personal love letter to you who are struggling today; you whose Mother’s Day experience might be rather bittersweet— or perhaps only bitter.

This is consent to feel fully the contents of your own heart without censorship or guilt or alteration.

If you are hurting, then hurt.

May you feel permission to cry, to grieve, to be not all right.

May you relieve yourself of the burden of pretending everything is fine or faking stability or concealing the damage.

May you feel not a trace of guilt for any twinge of pain or anger that seizes you today, because it is your right to feel.

Above all though, may you find encouragement even in your profound anguish.

May you find in your very sadness, the proof that your heart though badly broken, still works.

Let the pain you are enduring reassure you that you still have the capacity to care deeply, despite how difficult it has been.

See your grief as the terrible tax on loving people well, and see your unquenched longing for something better as a reminder of the goodness within you that desires a soft place to land.

If on this Mother’s Day you are struggling, know that you are not alone.

May these words be the flowers that you wait for or the call that won’t come or the conversation that you can’t have or the reunion that has not yet arrived.

Let them be hope packaged and personally delivered to the center of your heart, and may they sustain you.

In this time of great pain, know that you are seen and heard, and that you are more loved than you realize.

Be greatly encouraged today.