

MAY 3, 2009
EASTER 4
“Shepherd & Host”

Let us pray: Savior like a shepherd lead us and protect us even as you promise to host us at your table, at a festive meal celebrated in the midst of our enemies. Give us the confidence and courage that these metaphors of your constant presence promise. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

My maternal grandfather, Hugh John Griffith—each of which names my two brothers and I share—was a flinty and feisty little Welshman, an immigrant as a young man to a little town in central Wisconsin named, of all things, Redgranite, because here a little colony of granite quarriers from northwest Wales had been drawn to pursue their not particularly lucrative nor particularly highly skilled occupation. Once landed in the midst of Waushara County where the granite quarry soon was

abandoned to become a local swimming hole, Grandpa Griffith tried his hand at farming at which he had no experience and which the sandy soil, together with the economy of the Great Depression, made his prospects pretty bleak. He and his American-born wife Elnora managed to raise three daughters (having buried their eldest girl, Cecil), all of whom managed to get their teaching credential from the local county normal school which took one year of study after high school. (My mother, Mary, their eldest, in fact didn't finally receive her bachelor's degree until 1968—the same year I received mine!).

What finally brought some financial stability to Hugh and Elnora was their employment by the Dane County Home as what must have been the equivalent of what we'd call today “nurses aides” who assisted with the care and keeping of the poor, old folks who then occupied the County Home in which they were housed in their own

private room—an institution that I don't think even exists anymore. Every few weeks as a boy growing up in the 50's on my family's farm, I remember we'd be visited by Grandpa and Grandma Griffith off for a long weekend, who'd come to stay in our downstairs bedroom.

Grandpa Griffith, whom I remember always clad in his blue and white pin-striped denim overalls with matching cap, astounded me because when Sunday would come and the rest of us were all getting ready for church, he'd always beg off with the excuse that he'd yet again forgotten his good Sunday clothes. Truth was, it slowly dawned on me, that Hugh was not much of a church-goer and, truth-to-tell, Norwegian Lutherans weren't exactly his cup of tea religiously speaking, he, if he thought of himself in denominational terms at all, preferring the simple Congregational Church in Redgranite that must've retained a few more of the old Welsh hymns he loved to

sing and play on the piano. Anyway, unless it was the annual Christmas program or maybe Easter, Grandpa Griffith begged off attending church with the rest of us for his chronically sartorial deficiency.

I bother to tell you all this only because—and I don't remember how old I was—but on one of his visits Grandpa Griffith surprised me by challenging me out of the blue to learn by heart the words of the 23rd Psalm—and to seal the deal promised to pay me a dollar—a not inconsiderable sum in those days. Why, what his motivation was for doing so, just what he hoped to accomplish by this bribe offered to his oldest grandchild I haven't the foggiest. Or why the 23rd Psalm of all things? Why not a poem by Dylan Thomas or a favorite Welsh hymn? But I've never forgotten learning “by heart” the 23rd Psalm and my grandfather's role in making it happen.

One scholar of the Psalms—a former teacher of mine in Edinburgh by the name of

Robert Davidson has written: “*No other Psalm has such a central place in the hearts of people of **both sure and uncertain faith.***” Almost as though he had my grandpa in mind he goes on, “*Even those who seldom darken the door of a church or a synagogue have found this psalm speaking to them on occasions as varied as a wedding or a funeral.*” In fact, those little obituary cards they hand out at funeral homes will most often have on their back a depiction of Jesus as the Good Shepherd accompanied by the words of the 23rd Psalm, often in the King James version. Davidson continues: “*Its appeal lies both in its simplicity and in its profundity. The picture of the shepherd and his flock still strikes a chord with most people, even those brought up in a heavily industrialized or nonagrarian society. Throughout the psalm speaks of confidence and trust in a gracious, caring, and generous God.*” (The Vitality of Worship, p. 83).

I agree with my old teacher and am grateful to my grandfather, whatever his reasons may have been, for giving these words of the psalmist a special place in my heart—in my memory. For, indeed, the “Lord is my shepherd” is certainly one of the most comforting and assuring metaphors of God’s gracious presence in our lives that scripture affords. And of course, this Good Shepherd Sunday, as this fourth Sunday of Easter is called, every year puts before us several of those texts from both Hebrew and Greek scripture that serve to remind us how common an image God as good shepherd is—and how in the sixth chapter of John and other places, Jesus applies the metaphor to his own loving care for us going so far as in the opening of today’s Gospel reading to asserting “I am the good shepherd”—an assertion his Jewish hearers can be forgiven for taking as a blasphemous claim—for good shepherd language is God-language in Hebrew scripture.

Note how closely the psalmist sticks to the metaphor in the opening verses. Because the Lord is “my shepherd,” the psalmist insists “I shall not want.” For he “makes me lie down in green pastures” and “leads me beside still waters” — good grass and pure waters being precisely what sheep need for their sustenance. Only then does he “mix the metaphor” so to speak by going beyond the literal to assert “he restores my **soul**” — or “life” — as it might also be translated. Moreover, “he leads me in right paths” — “in paths of **righteousness**,” as I memorized it. God is the One who as Good Shepherd “leads” us both in the sense of safe-guarding us and caring for us, but also in seeing that we take the “right” path in life — “for his name’s sake,” the text says — perhaps meaning, “because that’s who God is and what God does.”

Only then does the text reach the true depth of our human existence as the psalmist confesses, “*even though I walk through the*

darkest valley” —I prefer the older and more literally faithful to the Hebrew original “valley of the shadow of death” which better conveys the sense not only of death itself but the anticipation and fear of death that casts a shadow in the midst of life. “*I fear no evil,*” the psalmist asserts —almost boasts. But the reason for his confidence is this: “*for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me*” —the “rod” being a kind of club to keep predators at bay and the staff being the shepherd crook —just like our bishops still bear in ceremonial occasions, where the curved top—the crook—is designed to be able to hook the neck of the sheep and pull it out of whatever danger it’s wandered into—as in Jesus’ parable of the shepherd who leaves the 99 to go in search of the single lost sheep.

“The Lord as my shepherd” is a remarkably rich image that must have inspired Jesus’ imagination in John 6 to free associate and let his mind wander even to

the point of imagining a good shepherd not only “who lays down his life for his sheep,” but also asserts in Jesus’ characteristically inclusive fashion that “*I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also,*” he says, “*and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd,*” he concludes. Jesus here goes well beyond the affirmations of the 23rd Psalm, but I think they are nonetheless inspired by it—a Psalm Jesus too we can expect must have known by heart.

What many of us may not at first recognize, however, is that in its final two verses our Psalm veers from its sheep and shepherd imagery to quite a different metaphor for God, though one that Jesus also made imaginative use of in his own preaching and story-telling: that of a host at table. The Psalm puts it in this language continuing to address Yahweh with the familiar, even intimate, second person singular pronoun “You.” “*You,*” the

psalmist says, “*prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows*” — all language evocative of God playing host at the great eschatological banquet or wedding feast, which would become such favorite image of Jesus, reminding us also of how Jesus played host at table in so many settings, sometimes also in the presence of those who perceived themselves to be his enemies, like the Pharisees who criticized his table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors. Or maybe you’re reminded of the Emmaus Road story in Luke’s Gospel and how Jesus assumed the role of host at his disciples’ table who were kept from recognizing their resurrected Lord until he “took the bread and blessed and broke it.” And surely too you remember those occasions described in the Gospels where Jesus himself was anointed with oil while a table guest and how he himself washed his disciples’ feet during his last meal with his

friends, as a living example of the great commandment he gave them “to love one another.” “*You prepare a table before me*” simply if richly overflows, as does the cup mentioned in the Psalm, overflows with what become for us allusions of Jesus’ own gracious playing of “host” in so many different venues—which of course take on sacramental dimensions in our own eucharistic life as church.

Finally the psalm closes on this promissory note, words that are really the psalmist’s own words of confident hope: “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long*—or, more simply and memorably in older translations, “*forever.*” My old teacher takes this to imply that there can be “no continuing satisfying life for him (the psalmist) unless it is centered on worship. To the house of the Lord, to God’s dwelling place in the midst of God’s people, he shall

return again and again to renew his vitality through joining in worship and sharing a vision with the people of God. Theology divorced from worship is arid; life devoid of worship has limited horizons.”

One last observation from another commentator that I find particularly pertinent to this Easter season only several weeks removed from Holy Week and our hearing of Jesus’ cry of dereliction from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” — which of course are the opening words of Psalm 22. In God’s ordering of things can we imagine it is only coincidental that Psalm 23, this song of confidence in God’s graciousness, should be the sequel to Psalm 22 which Jesus quoted with his last breath as his dying cry of despair, of God-abandonment? “The plea for rescue and for God’s nearness, so urgent (and plaintive) in Psalm 22” is answered in the succeeding words of the 23rd Psalm which begins and ends with the Lord’s

name—the God who is both protecting shepherd and gracious host whom Jesus most intimately of all addressed as Abba—Daddy, Papa—whom Jesus invited us his disciples to join him in addressing as “Our Father—our Abba.”

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Amen.