

#23 15-16  
Psalm 23  
Revelation 7:9-17  
John 10:22-30  
Acts 9:36-43

## *God as Shepherd*

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Tabitha means Gazelle in Aramaic. A name that brings forth images of grace, beauty, and speed. Her name in Greek is also offered, this could be because she was well known in both the Jewish society as well as the Greek. It is also true that this story was told about a time when Peter and the Disciples were reaching out to the Gentiles as well. From the little information we have here, much has been postulated about Tabitha /Dorcas. She was portrayed as loved and highly respected in this telling scripture. She was known for her charity, she was laid in an "upper room" which is normally reserved for special occasions. Peter was sent for as soon as she died, and it would have taken him several days to get there from where he was when he heard, which suggests he was close to her and she was an important figure in the growing community.

When he got there, there was a bit of fashion show going on. Tabitha was a seamstress and had made clothes for many of the women. Paintings of her portray her sewing. Peter asks for privacy, requests Tabitha to rise, and she does, and then he presents her to the people, the handiwork of God, and this causes many to believe.

Some theologians see a similarity to when Jesus went to the daughter of Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, who was dead by the time he got there. This "little girl" was dead and Jesus said, "Talitha kum" meaning "little girl arise," and she did.

Or the resurrection of Lazarus - or the resurrection of Christ, dead a few days and rises from the dead. There are a few resurrections of the dead in our scriptures, and the result was always a growth in faith and in the movement.

There is a connection between our understanding of who God is, and how we experience life and death. It has been speculated that there are 9 people in the Bible who have been raised from the dead, 3 in the OT, 6 in the NT. Some Jewish literature refers to God as being the one who has the power to resurrect the dead, so when Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, Peter, Paul, are credited as doing such a thing, it sends the people spinning to find ways to categorize what has happened into a new understanding of humans' relationship with the power of God. It is as though, what was once only God's power, has become available through some humans, and death is not final and how can we deal with this rather haphazard possibility.

Because we would all love to have that accessible to us, wouldn't we? Especially when we are in the pain of the loss of someone who defined who we are so much! It is like part of our being was removed and we would never be whole again! Death of a close loved one is, perhaps, the greatest pain we can experience. And what is God's relationship to us in that loss? What is the Community of Believers' relationship to us in the loss? What is the role of the church leaders when we are experiencing death?

Death of a loved one, creates in us a sense of woundedness, weakness, exposed, vulnerable, disoriented, confused . . . it is as though we are lost in our souls. Wandering around trying to get reoriented, even though we may be in our own homes and know where everything is.

“O we like sheep . . . have gone astray . . .” this analogy is not only for those times when we have found ourselves no longer seeking the will of God for our lives, and discover ourselves in a mess . . . but it is also a great analogy for those times when life has made us feel lost, and we haven’t done anything wrong . . . but life just changes at times and we are called to reorient ourselves. Like a death, or political changes, or divorce, or such life altering experiences.

And the image we have of God, of Christ, of spiritual leaders dead and alive, is that we can be lost, and confused and straying ~ and we are safe. We have a community to help us, and we have a God who has the power over life and death who can guide us into being fully a part of God’s plan, after we have felt separated. This is the image of God as a Shepherd.

And the visual testimony of those being brought back to life when the mourners were still in the first phase of shock and trying to figure out, “what is my life going to be without this soul in it?” ~ the experience of that loss being stopped in its tracks and replaced with the hole being filled with the beloved ~ that is the ultimate presence of God. As though we are being reminded that seeking God can fill all the desires our human lives can imagine.

It is with this faith in God, during moments of disorientation, when the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is so profound! Because we know that in loss, only the immense power and beauty and mystery of God - the universe - could make us feel safe from the possibility of getting lost in our own minds.

And that is our role as Christians in real life, but also as members of this congregation. We are called to love one another, created trusting relationships, make ourselves available for hope and joy when we find someone may be feeling wanting. For just as Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, Peter, Paul, were taking on the role of Shepherd for those dealing with loss, we are all freed to take on that role for others.

The image of Shepherd is not just for the Lord to be our Shepherd, but for us to recognize when those around us are suffering and to shepherd each other to “green pastures; still waters; and to restores each others’ souls.”

Let us seek ways to offer each other tremendously powerful, miraculous hope! Crazy Hope! Hope that is as crazy as the idea of bringing someone back from the dead! And we do that by loving each other so kindly, and purely, that we may never feel lost or alone. For God is our Shepherd and we shall not want, and we can we shepherds for each other as well.

Bless us all as we navigate this life, which has obstacles and confusions, and let us offer each other our prayers, our laughter, our comfort, and our strongest, best wishes! AMEN