***THE NOUN IS A VERB***

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Texts: John 10:1-16 and Ezekiel 34:1-15

English can be an odd language at times. For instance, how do you explain that r-e-a-d is what I do today if pronounced like r-e-e-d which is a marshy grass which has nothing to do with words, but r-e-a-d is what I did yesterday if pronounced like r-e-d which is not necessarily the color of the book I read or read even if my name is Reid spelled with an “i”? Or try figuring out why

the plural of house is houses, but the plural of mouse is not mouses,

and while

the plural of grouse is like house, the plural of louse is like mouse.

And the plural of spouse is spouses, not spice which has nothing to do with a spouse, at least from a grammatical perspective. You can’t take the obvious meaning of a word for granted, for we drive on a parkway but park on a driveway. Add i-n to the front of a word and you make its opposite, so that flexible becomes inflexible, except that flammable and inflammable mean the same thing. Sometimes the same word is a noun and a verb with completely different meanings – your sink doesn’t sink, does it? Yet, sometimes the same word is a noun and a verb that describes the action of the noun – fans fan though some fans cheer and do the wave, even though waves don’t wave. This is probably why the Holy Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew and Greek, not English, though those ancient languages have issues of their own. All of which brings us to this familiar image in our Scripture readings this day, the shepherd, though in English *shepherd* is both a noun and a verb.

“*The Lord is my shepherd*,” says the psalmist in the oft-repeated 23rd psalm. “*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep*,” says the Lord in that passage from Ezekiel that we just read. “*I am the good shepherd*,” says Jesus to the Pharisees. Old Testament and New Testament alike find divine identity in this image of one who tends the sheep with rod and staff in hand. One might wonder whether that is because the Lord is so much like a shepherd or because we are so much like sheep, or perhaps both. A shepherd without sheep isn’t much of a shepherd. If the Lord is our shepherd and Jesus the *good* shepherd, it is only because we are the sheep for whom they care. In the words of the 100th psalm, we are God’s people and the sheep of God’s pasture. We are the sheep whom the divine shepherd shepherds.

While most of us don’t know much about sheep, we know enough to recognize that being described as sheep is not the most flattering of images. Sheep are not the brightest animals to step off the ark. They don’t do anything extraordinarily well except grow wool. They are vulnerable to predators because they have few natural defenses. They are prone to a certain herd mentality which is to say they are followers, and as everyone from Jesus to Little Bo Peep notes, they tend to get lost easily. We may think of ourselves as the rams of the flock, those horned sheep with an independent attitude better able to care for ourselves and hold our own in a fight, but the Scriptures never say we are the rams of God’s pasture. All the verses say we are the defenseless sheep, and the Lord is our shepherd.

In the great cathedrals of the world and in small country churches, stained glass windows bear the likeness of young shepherds cradling little lambs in their arms or bearded shepherds standing tall, staff in hand, amid the herd of sheep. Every crèche and Christmas nativity play has shepherds dressed in bathrobes gathered round the holy infant so tender and mild. But for most of us, that is the extent of our experience of shepherds. Most of what we know of them comes to us from the 23rd psalm. The shepherd is the one who makes the sheep lie down in green pastures, leads them beside still waters, and restores their souls. He leads them on the right paths. He protects them with rod and staff in the valley of the shadow of death. He eases their fears by his presence. That is how the shepherd shepherds the flock – by leading them, protecting them, binding up their wounds, bringing them back when they stray, leading them out and bringing them home, reassuring them night and day that he is near and they are cared for.

We are the ones who need to be led because we don’t know where we are going; we need to be protected because we cannot save ourselves; we need healing for wounded bodies and souls and mending of broken hearts and spirits; we need to be brought back when we stray away and find ourselves in God-forsaken places; we need to be reassured that in this corner of the vast universe we are not alone. We are the sheep; the Lord is our shepherd. And so we pray:

*Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,*

*beyond my fears, from death into life.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

In speaking to the people of Israel through Ezekiel, the Lord makes clear that the religious leaders were pretty poor shepherds. They were charged by God with shepherding the flock as God’s agents, but instead of caring for the flock, they were fleecing them and neglecting them. Jesus offers a similar critique of those who try to lead the people like thieves and bandits. “*I will be their shepherd*,” says the Lord. “*I am the good shepherd*,” says Jesus. And yet there are a host of modern pseudo-shepherds who would have you follow them – claiming to be the only one who can lead you to green pastures and to rescue you from the dangers of the 21st century. Their promises are often rooted in fear and hate and demonization of their opponents and have little to do with Jesus’ call to love God and your neighbors. They threaten and cajole and make a host of false promises – and still people wander off from God’s paths to follow them. They tell us what we want to hear and tempt us to abandon God and follow them, and so we pray:

*Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,*

*beyond my fears, from death into life.*

Over the past three years we have weathered a pandemic storm that caught us all off guard. Well over a million Americans have died from COVID and some are still dying even as we have largely returned to life as we knew it pre-pandemic. Our world was turned upside down and inside out, and the trauma and conflict generated by the virus and our response to it are still with us even as we emerge from its worst days. Future variants and the impact of long-COVID make many uneasy, for the virus is a predator we cannot see with the naked eye. We may no longer be in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but we still fear the evil that lurks out there that we cannot see. Do not fear for I am with you, says the Lord. My rod and my staff they comfort you. And so we pray:

*Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,*

*beyond my fears, from death into life.*

Cancer doesn’t move as swiftly as COVID. It isn’t communicable and no schools or businesses have closed because of it. But for those who have been told that it is living within them or within someone they love, it changes the world and their outlook upon it. Some cancers can’t be stopped and then the question is not how to die, but how to live in the time that is left. Some cancers can be held off for long periods of time, but the treatments change day-to-day living. And some cancers can be beaten, but they are never completely out of mind, even if they are no longer in the body. As one cancer survivor described it, the specter of cancer lingers on even after the cancer is gone. Yet again and again men, women and children face this disease with courage, strength, and enduring hope that bears witness to a greater hope and promise, and so with them we pray:

*Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,*

*beyond my fears, from death into life.*

The world is a mess. There is war in Ukraine with multiple reports of Russian war crimes. Sudan is on the brink of civil war. There is unrest in the Middle East among Israelis and Palestinians. In our own nation there are repeated mass shootings – yet another yesterday; gun violence plagues our cities; and there are far more guns than people. Toxic politics has us on the verge of default on our national debts to which both parties have contributed generously. Women’s health care has become a political volleyball with little regard for the welfare of the women or of their children once they enter the world. Fears of recession cast a long shadow. Earthquakes, tornados, drought, and global climate change seem to suggest that even Mother Nature is angry or anxious. The headlines are a dizzying array of bad news, and yet we keep on keeping on. Our support for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance helps in tragedies, soup kitchens and food banks feed the hungry, we assist refugees in our community and provide meals to folks recovering from illness or surgery, we knit prayer shawls to share with folks facing difficult times. There are glimmers of hope for the economy, efforts to promote peace in some of those war-torn corners of the world, and commitments to work for justice and equity for those who have been victims of injustice and inequity for far too long! The Good News of the Gospel is still good even when, and perhaps especially when, all the other news seems so bad. And so we pray:

*Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,*

*beyond my fears, from death into life.*

“*I am the good shepherd*,” says Jesus. “*I know my own and my own know me. I lay down my life for the sheep*.” “*In order to lead a people one must first know them*,” says Nelson Mandela. The one who shepherds us day to day is the one who knows us by name, the one who has walked the path of suffering for us without straying. He knows what it is to be the sheep – vulnerable, dependent, and in need. He knows our fears well-founded and unfounded, knows our needs and our wants, knows us better than we know ourselves. For, not only is he the good shepherd, he is also the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is good because God is good, and he who is the good shepherd is Emmanuel, God with us, the One who shepherds us to good green pastures and restores our souls. The noun is indeed a verb! The Lord who is our shepherd, shepherds us each and every day, in life and in death, and so assured of that tender care we humbly and gratefully and confidently pray:

*Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,*

*beyond my fears, from death into life.*

Amen

1. Marty Haugen, “Shepherd me, O God”, *Sing the Faith*: No. 2058, Geneva Press: Louisville, 2003 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)