

THE FIRST 15

Monday, July 15, 2024

Today is Monday, July 15 and we are learning what the Bible says about holiness.

OPENING PRAYER

In the morning, I seek the God who loves me. I quiet my mind, calm my breath and focus on the goodness of my Lord and Shepherd. He brings me to green pastures, leads me to still waters and guides me in paths of righteousness. He shows me the way of holiness and strengthens my steps to walk in the way that leads to life. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.
Psalm 23:1-6

REFLECTION

During these hot Texas summer months we are slowing down to enjoy a lengthy reflection on a beloved Psalm - Psalm twenty-three. This week we reflect on the words, "He leads me in paths of righteousness." The Good Shepherd leads his flock down a well-worn sheep trail toward good pasture and quiet waters, to places of security, abundance and rest. This trail is the right path, the good path, the trusted path. Wandering off the good path can lead unwary sheep into danger. By veering off the trail and failing to follow the shepherd, a sheep could become lost, fall and sustain an injury or encounter a pack of hungry wolves.

The 23rd Psalm was written by King David who grew up shepherding his father Jesse's sheep. As a young man he was very familiar with the roles of a shepherd and his sheep. At an older age, when David reflected on his life with God, I imagine he recalled seasons when he was on the right path, closely following the Lord's lead. Yet, he surely remembered other times when he veered from that right path, like when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for her husband Uriah to be sent to the frontlines of the battle (2 Samuel 11:1-12:9).

Perhaps in your life you are in one of those seasons when you are on the right path. The challenge for all Christians is to stay on that path. We easily become complacent or distracted. Sometimes we might feel constrained or limited by the well-worn paths of righteousness. We may be tempted to escape the predictability of those holy ruts and blaze a new trail of our own. Just as sheep find it easy to stray off the path, abandon the shepherd and leave the safety of the flock, it is similarly easy for humans to stray off the paths of righteousness.

We are prone to wander. The prophet Isaiah said, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way" (Isaiah 53:6). Some sheep wander away slowly meandering from the path in nearly imperceptible increments casually gnawing their way on further and further clumps of grass. Other sheep sprint away suddenly attracted by something that has captured their fickle attention. For human sheep it might begin with a curious step, appealing whim or careless thought. One small step in the wrong direction leads to another and another and another. The guard rails are there for a reason. The Good Shepherd knows what is best for us. He guides us on the right trails and good paths that lead to blessings, abundance, safety and peace.

Ask: How closely am I following my Lord and Shepherd? Are there parts of my life where I am tempted to veer off the good path and go my own way?

Pause and Pray

CLOSING PRAYER

Forgive me, Lord, I am prone to wander. Show me where I am at risk of not following you in paths of righteousness. Awaken me to the smallest missteps when I veer to the left or the right of the trail you have marked out for me. I trust you to lead me the way I should go. Guide me on the straight and narrow road, strengthen me for the good journey and encourage me along the way. Remind me to keep my eyes fixed on you as I travel the sweet life of faith. Make me lie down in green pastures, lead me beside still waters, refresh my spirit and revive my soul. Amen.