

The Psalmist gives us a foreshadow or glimpse into God's deep, abiding love and God's concern for us and all of creation. The Psalmist sees God as a shepherd who cares for the sheep as a true shepherd would. I am told sheep are stubborn. Sheep wander off and can't find their way back to the flock. The grass in the other pasture always looks greener. They often forget the benefits of having a shepherd. And, occasionally they begin to think they have been promoted to the status of shepherd and that the flock is theirs. Through all of this, the Shepherd still loves and cares for the sheep.

As we look at the 23rd Psalm we see what the Shepherd does:

The Shepherd makes us rest, lies us down in green, verdant pastures, bringing us to a place of abundant food and resources. He understands our need for rest, a quiet place (even when we try to work more than we should).

The Shepherd finds places of still waters (sheep need still water to drink, cannot drink from moving water). Thus, the Shepherd knows our needs and restores and refreshes our souls and bodies.

The Shepherd leads us in the right direction. We tend to get lost! We tend to follow the wrong directions. A woman in South Dakota posted a sign on the drive to her home, "This is NOT Mt. Rushmore". For some reason people's GPS's were directing them to her home rather than the popular attraction. The Shepherd does not lead us in the wrong direction.

The Shepherd promises to be with us even in the darkest of days. The Shepherd stays through the long hours of the night. He is there to comfort us and give us strength for the journey. The Shepherd stays when others leave.

The Shepherd celebrates with us! I keep wondering if we in the church have lost our ability to celebrate God's presence in our lives and in the world. God created the world, its beauty and splendor for us to enjoy and to celebrate.

The Shepherd understands the joy of table fellowship. A table is prepared. Even after a loss as we gather around a table it is not long before stories come and laughter is mingled with the tears. Sometimes a good laugh is needed. Even in the most dire of circumstances humor and laughter can sometimes change the situation, lighten the mood. Heal! Laughter promotes healing.

There is something about having someone who cares for us even when we may not want to be cared for. We remember how good it was to have someone who wanted the best for us.

Two wonderful images from Scripture come to mind. The Shepherd, who goes and searches for the sheep. He even leaves the flock in order to find the one that is lost. And, then the Parent who waits and longs for the prodigal son/daughter to come home.

There are days when we want to be found but we are truly lost. I am told that sheep cannot get back to the flock once the flock is out of sight. Even though they may hear the flock their sense of direction is so poor that the way back is almost impossible for them to discern. The Shepherd is so concerned for the sheep that he seeks them out and gently carries them home.

There are days when we want to come home but we are not sure if we will be welcomed. It would not have done our parents any good to try to find us. We didn't want to be home. Then

we remember how good it was at home and as we near the house we see mom/dad waiting - well, not waiting but rushing out to greet us.

The results are the same - there is a party, a celebration. There is someone who was willing to go and search and find us and there are those waiting for us to come home. What wonderful images of a caring, creator God.

John comes across a surprising vision, a vision so powerful that the question is asked, "Who are these?" There is a multitude of people, more than anyone can count. But, not just one people but people from every nation, every language, every tribe. This is not a restricted event - the doors have been thrown open and everyone is welcome and present. The people who were once considered outsiders are now taking part in the party. Everyone is welcome to come. This is an image some still have problems with. An image that some do not find appealing - surely "they" won't be there. Yet, the Shepherd has included them and welcomed them.

The Shepherd comes and there is no longer any hunger or thirst. The pastures are green and the waters still. There is safe shelter, a place of peace and security. The Shepherd is there to guide the journey and it is the Shepherd who will take and wipe the tears from the eyes of the sheep.

The journey is not always easy. Valleys are not always fun places to be. Pain, suffering and loss are a part of the journey - a part of being human. Max Lucado in his book, God Came Near, places emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. His birth was as natural as all births. He was helpless as all infants are helpless. His thumb throbbed with pain when he hit it with a hammer. He knew the loss of a parent and rejection by his family and friends. He is aware of the frailty of human life. But, his journey was worth the cost and God was there to welcome him home and will be there to welcome us.

It is difficult for us to look toward heaven. Describing it in any human terms is impossible. Even as John tries the image gets blurred in our minds if we are honest. It is an indescribable place.

A poor example: We were headed to the Grand Canyon. Our eldest son had visited a few months earlier and told us that we had to go. As we were preparing to leave one of our friends told us that no matter how many pictures we had seen, no matter how many documentaries we had watched nothing would have adequately prepared us for the first glimpse over the rim. And they were right!

So can it be said of heaven — "And God will..."

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989