

August 12, 2007
Psalm 23, Luke 12:35-38
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Can You Draw a Picture of God?

My father was a very bright and very talented man. He was a physician who had many interests - from art to farming, from medical research to poetry. When I was in college, my father left home. For a number of years our family life was quite unsettled. I believe my father left looking for something I am not sure he ever found. I was left with a sense of loss and abandonment. As a young man, I spent a lot of years trying to come to terms with those feelings.

We spend much of our lives waiting and hoping for things to happen or situations to resolve themselves. This past week, several of our members have told me how they are looking for the right job to come along. Some were let go because the company downsized; others quit out of sheer frustration. Some of you are waiting for the results of medical tests to determine the nature and treatment of the health problems you face. Some are waiting to finish school, or for the results of an exam, or for a house to sell. Others are hoping to establish a new relationship or to reconcile a marriage. We spend a lot of time waiting and hoping.

In the Scriptures, Jesus tells a number of parables about waiting. Sometimes, the time of waiting is described as long and frustrating; other times, those who wait are startled by the sudden appearance of someone or some news. In the parable we heard today, the servants are waiting for the master to come home from a wedding banquet. They do not know when the master will come home or what kind of mood he will be in when he returns. Did he have a good time? Did he have to sit by someone with whom he had a bad business deal? Did he party too much? Will he be tired and grouchy? Is he going to come home early or stay out all night? They don't know. They simply wait. Waiting can be very trying, but Jesus declares that those who wait for the master's return are blessed!

Of course, Jesus is talking about our waiting upon God. As the prophet Isaiah spoke, "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31) Jesus is also talking about our confident hope in his return at the end of time. Before that final day, doesn't Jesus come to us time and again as we wait through the days and nights of our distress and our anxieties? How do we know that the one who comes to relieve our distress and to calm our anxieties is Jesus?

We know him by what he does.

Jesus says that when the master returns, the master puts on his apron and serves the waiting servants. In the strange and wonderful way the Bible has of turning everything upside down, the master becomes the servant. Isn't this the same picture of God we are given in the 23rd Psalm? The creator of heaven and earth, who dwells beyond time and space, is the shepherd who cares for the sheep: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The psalm draws a picture of God, whose tender care provides for our needs and keeps us from being in want.

Of the many remarkable aspects of this psalm, I want to lift up three things. First, the psalm speaks of God as the shepherd. Throughout the Bible, God is pictured as the shepherd of the people. From the law and the prophets and from the psalms to Jesus, this is a consistent picture of God. God cares for the people like a shepherd cares for the flock. In the words of this psalm, the shepherd provides green pastures for rest and food, still water to drink, protection in danger, comfort in distress and healing in injury and illness. It is a picture of a generous, compassionate and abundant God. Jesus spoke of God as a shepherd, as the one who will go to any length to find and restore the lost sheep. Jesus even spoke of himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

The picture of God we carry within ourselves determines much about how we live. If we see God as the miser who dribbles

out meager blessings, or the severe judge always ready to condemn, or the indulgent parent at our beck and call who gives us whatever we want whenever we want it, or the small God whose ways of thinking and acting are no larger than our own, we will not live a spiritually healthy, abundant life. We reduce the God of the Bible to an idol of our own making. Christians who live peaceful, generous, compassionate, open, courageous lives draw inspiration from a picture of God as the loving shepherd.

Secondly, the psalm speaks of the way God cares for us. According to scholars, this is one of two instances in the Bible in which “shall not want” is used in the absolute. That is, the verb “to lack” or to “be in need of” does not have an object (pp. 113-4, *Interpreting the Psalms*, Patrick D. Miller, Jr.). The psalmist makes a startling claim. The shepherd supplies all of our needs. We do not always get what we want even when we think it is what we most need. Underneath all the experiences of our lives - our hungers, our troubles, our fears, our disappointments, our joys and our grief - is the sustaining hand of the shepherd. After the psalmist makes the bold declaration, “I shall not want,” he enumerates the many ways in which God cares for us by leading, providing, safeguarding us. This shepherd accompanies us all of our days, even to the end of our lives. Remember, it was Jesus who said, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.”

Finally, this remarkable psalm speaks of God’s care for each one of us as individuals: “The Lord is my shepherd.” Your particular life matters to God. God cares about your own personal needs. This is the only instance in the Old Testament picture of God as the shepherd of the individual believer. All of the other references to God as the shepherd refer to Israel as a whole. God is our shepherd. Yet, this psalm claims that God watches over each one of us with the attentive eye of the shepherd. As St. Augustine wrote, “God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us.”

Our Affirmation of Faith this morning is taken from one of the eleven confessions in our Book of Confessions. It is the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. It dares to claim that our only hope is, “that I belong - body and soul, in life and in death - not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ,” who “protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation.” With the terrible things that happen in our world from children shot by stray bullets to global hunger, from unending wars to domestic violence, that is an extraordinary claim to make. We will never come to a peaceful and just world until we hold this picture of God in our minds and hearts.

The Lord is my shepherd. This claim of faith is not something we can prove, but we can witness to its truth in our lives. In our times of waiting in hope and in fear, the Lord comes to us as a shepherd to provide for our need. Over the years, I have seen how God has come to me to comfort me, to guide me, to correct me and to open new doors for me.

Near the end of my father’s life, he had a severe stroke that left him partially paralyzed. He had difficulty speaking more than a few mumbled words. For a man who had loved walking in the fields and exploring the woods, and who had carried out his profession as a psychiatrist by listening and speaking, his life became very difficult. After years of pain and distress, he took his life. We gathered as family and friends for the memorial service in my home town. A heavy spirit lay in the air like a thick blanket. The minister who led the service was a longtime friend of my father. The service began with words and prayers; then the minister said these words:

“The Lord is Jim’s shepherd; he shall not want.
He makes Jim lie down in green pastures;
He leads him beside still waters.
He restores Jim’s soul...
He shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

I had been waiting a long time to hear such a word. And I knew every word was true because he gave me a new picture of God.