

# Shepherding life's Wintry Terrain

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 11 May 2025

A Reflection by Rev Vladimir Korotkov

Easter 4C

## Psalm 23: A Contemporary Paraphrasing by Francis McNab; Luke 10:22-30

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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### Introduction

Throughout history humanity faces wintry terrains, dark times; where is the Divine Source of life in these times? For the people in the ancient near east, the notion of shepherding, Divine and human, was one way of imaging this. Ancient Israel moved between stable, nomadic and pastoral forms of social, economic, political and religious existence.

### 1 Shepherding during the winters of Israel's ancient pastoral history

First, though, we need to liberate shepherding from our middle-class, individualistic, normative western interpretation of shepherding. We need to attempt to access the world behind the text.

Psalm 23, a shepherding psalm, is the best known of the psalms. It expresses powerful images of Yahweh's unseen yet companioning presence within life, especially the wintriest moments.

But this image is more than individual, personal pastoral care. As William Loader reminds us:

*"Shepherding was a big metaphor which could encompass the vision of the reign of Yahweh with the full range of political, social, and personal dimensions which that entails. It is much bigger than 'pastoral' care, understood often in a very limited sense without the wider dimensions."*

It is suggested that the primary historical event that informs Psalm 23 was probably the Exodus and Wilderness experience. The time when Israel remembered and celebrated Yahweh's protection, care and new guidelines for living together. It celebrates the triumph of light over darkness, the shepherding nature of God and symbolised freedom from oppression. It embraces the personal, communal and the structural and addresses the reality of colonisation and the process of ongoing liberation.

Howard Wallace offers other interpretive insights, which I will briefly summarise.

Psalm 23 is often interpreted to be about death, but it is about the journey of the life of the reader. Yahweh as shepherd wields power for the good of the whole life of the people, to sustain, to guide, to protect and to open up new ways of being.

A key role was to provide sufficient nourishment for personal and collective life, including food and water (vv. 1-2). This shepherd is also responsible for the personal and collective self-confidence of the flock. To “restore the soul”, the Hebrew word being *nephesh*, means to restore life and vitality. Restoration is not to return to an idyllic past. It suggests change, empowerment and accompaniment on the “right pathways”, to right our ways of justice and compassion.

To walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil’ relates more to human trials and tribulations of life, including physical dangers and illness, grief.

In v. 5 when Yahweh sets a ‘table’ before us, Yahweh is imaged as a gracious and generous host, who expresses continuing goodness, and divine mercy. The Hebrew term is *hesed*, which means ‘kindness’, ‘solidarity’ or ‘loyalty’ in times of failure and shame.

## **2 Shepherd in John 10: Jesus the transgressive door, voice and activity of the authentic shepherd**

We can see that John is influenced by Psalm 23. But he deepens the notion of divine and human shepherding through the story of Jesus. Which shapes our shepherding.

John’s Jesus radicalises the notion of being shepherd. He does this by adding the images of Jesus being the door, that the followers of Jesus hear his “voice”, and that he is the authentic (good) shepherd whose commitment to humanity involves even giving his life, of dying for us, and then empowered by the Divine Source of life to create new abundant life.

This demonstrates the length to which Jesus and his Parent God would go to ensure we have life with abundance for humanity.

To briefly summarise, John fuses historical elements with parables and allegorical interpretation to add new depth to the story of Jesus, and to reveal the new radical relationship humanity experiences with the risen-crucified Christ and the Divine Source of life.

And especially the story of Jesus and his compassionate and liberative engagement with the poor and excluded, of his desire to lead us out of blindness and illusions - which our societies construct – into a new way of being. This engagement with those pushed to the margins created ambiguity in the notion of shepherding. A normative understanding and a transgressive one.

And in fact, the choice that the historical Jesus made to use the image of shepherd to imagine his engagement with the outsiders was probably transgressive and offensive to those Jewish religious leaders who defended the order of that community. That’s why they kept challenging the practice and teaching of Jesus. Shepherds were often outsiders whose marginalisation forced them to on the edges of ordered society or outside them; literally out beyond the gates of the city and often accused of grazing their flocks in green pastures they did not actually own.

So, for Jesus to describe himself as the authentic shepherd was probably to critique traditional patterns of exclusionary power and authority. For a marginalised, alienated people, the good shepherd points toward an alternative source of power and a door into a new way of being together.

Women in Ancient Israel, like Rachel, were also able to be shepherds. And in John's Christian communities at the turn of the first century in Ephesus, there would have been women who were accepted as shepherds which would have challenged the patriarchal power relations of Jewish communities around them.

### **3      Shepherding during the winters of Israel's ancient pastoral history**

In John 10: 22 John writes "*it is winter*". During winter Israel celebrated the festival of Dedication, Hanukkah. It was a time to give thanks and remember Yahweh's presence, care and liberative intervention during its past wintry terrain of Israel's history.

Hanukkah originated out of a dark time in Jewish history, when in 175 BCE the Syrian king Antiochus planned to colonise all the land from Syria to Egypt, which included Judea. "*The Jewish people resisted him, but he found support among segments of the Jewish aristocracy and priesthood.*" Antiochus desecrated the Temple and ordered the Jews to abandon the Torah and publicly worship the Greek gods, colonising their society, culture and faith.

People were persecuted and killed. In 164 BCE, Judas Maccabeus led a successful revolt against the Syrian forces. The Temple was rebuilt and refurbished, and it was rededicated.

So implicitly, in that period of Israel's experience the dual shepherding presence of Yahweh together with their shepherding liberating activity of leaders like Judas Maccabeus was discerned.

### **4      How do we experience and engage in ethical, authentic and liberative shepherding in the winter of our lives?**

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of "*When bad things happen to good people*", shared in an interview that Psalm 23 is the answer to the question, "*How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?*" What inspired him to write his book was the death of his son, who was 14 years old and was born with an incurable illness. He shared:

*"Where did we find the strength and the ability to raise him, to comfort him when he was sick and scared, and ultimately to lose him? And the only answer is, when we used up all of our own strength and love and faith, there really is a God, and [God] replenishes your love and your strength and your faith."*

In his Rabbinical, dialectical fashion, he shared that Divine Life inspired not just pious affirmation to trust, but inspires us to be truly empowered to shepherd and care for others.

On the one hand, he said,

*"The role of God is not to explain and not to justify but to comfort, to find people when they are living in darkness, take them by the hand, and show them how to find their way into the sunlight again."*

Then, on the other hand, he deals with why people get stuck and guilty, and in this way, empowered by his own faith, he deals with the self, the inner life and anxieties of people in despair and resignation.

We can never separate theology (the Divine Source of life at work in life), and psychology (who we are in our complexity), or politics (the ways we construct society for the good of all, equality and justice)!

We are shepherded by the unseen yet present God, replenishing our love, faith and hope, opening our ears and eyes to replenish life abundantly at every level of life.

Sister Joan Chittister a Benedictine nun and a social psychologist, remarked:

*The role of [real] religion [real faith] is to bring us to an awareness of life to transform the world, to come to see the world as God sees the world and to bring it as close to the vision of God as we possibly can.*

Why? Scripture is very clear. What God changes, God changes through us.

And, as Paul Lehmann, a student of Paul Tillich, writes in his book, *The Transfiguration of Politics*, we witness the acts of the Divine Source of Life mysteriously in transfiguration in human lives, cultures, societies and nations wherever human life is made more human [events of liberation and freedom, the transvaluation of values]. *"The things that are not transform the things that are."*

Our faith holds that the Divine Source of Life is the beyond in our midst, mystery and unseen, yet moving in and between us in ways only revealed as we make human life more human, inclusive and liberative.

John's Jesus uses the shepherd imagery to inform our faith and practice of the intimate, mutual relationship that humanity can experience with the Divine Source of Life in and through the story of Jesus.