

PSALM 23 – A WHIP, A BISCUIT AND A STAFF

If you have animals in your life, animals you are responsible for you can treat them in one of three ways:

with a whip
with a biscuit
with a staff.

Let me explain.

A whip: You see lions and tigers in the circus treated this way. It's fear and punishment based. The animals do what the trainer wants because they are afraid of the whip. If they don't do what the trainer wants, the whip is a very effective changer of animal minds and behaviour.

GOD IS NOT LIKE THAT.

Let me say that again: GOD IS NOT LIKE THAT.

That kind of God has been preached in the past, the God who will get you if you're bad, who will punish and use the spiritual equivalent of the whip. This is not the God of the Bible and this is not the relationship that God wants with us. God does not use a whip of any sort.

Biscuits: That's how you train dogs....dogs will do just about anything for a biscuit. They'll sit up, roll over, shake a paw....I often wonder what they're thinking as they're doing that – are they saying to themselves, “I'll play your silly game just give me the biscuit”

Do you remember the Snoopy cartoon where Charlie Brown says, “go fetch this, and I'll give you a cookie”?

In the next frame Snoopy bounds off, to fetch whatever it is.
In the next frame he's back, saying “what kind of cookie?”

God doesn't treat us like that either. Giving us good things if we're good. If we sit up and beg. God is not like that.

Those are two very common ideas about God though, and I run into it all the time, especially when bad things happen to people.

In the hospital for example: “What did I do to deserve this?”

Or if someone else is hurt or dies, people will say, “why did this have to happen to so and so....there are criminals walking around still alive” - as though God dishes out good health or bad health, life or death like a whip or a biscuit.

Two more personal examples:

- 1) Although I'm the oldest in our family we did have a brother who was born 4 years before I was born. He died at 5 months. My parents were not married at that time. And my mom carried that for years inside her; she was convinced that her baby died because she and dad were not married. We talked a lot about that after I was old enough to discuss that with her, and I believe she worked her

way through those feelings, but that was a horrible thing to carry around. No one told her that, but somehow she absorbed a feeling about God and how God might work....that would be SOME KIND OF A WHIP.

- 2) My friend Margaret. By the time I met her, her marriage was deteriorating, and she was in a lot of pain. Margaret was the kid in her family who was the responsible one – you know what I mean? She always tried to do the right thing, not to upset her parents, make the right decisions....be a good girl. She tried so hard to be a good girl. And she was. She WAS a good girl. And somehow, inside herself she believed that ...there would be some kind of reward. As we talked, she said it out loud for the first time in her life “I was a good girl – why is this happening to me?” She thought she'd get a biscuit.

We've got to get this really clear.
God does not use a whip
and
God does not use a biscuit.

The bad things that happen are NOT God's will or NOT God's fault.
And God does not hand out blessings only to those who roll over and shake a paw.
No whips and no biscuits.

This is a staff. Shepherds used them in biblical times and used them in guiding their sheep.
The commentaries say that the staff was used for several things:

- 1) For guiding. Shepherds led their flocks from ahead....would walk ahead of them, seeking out the best land for grazing, and the safest places and the sources of water.
- 2) For helping them over rough places....
- 3) For getting them out of a hole

It's a lovely, gentle picture of a God who cares for us intimately, and

The image of God as shepherd is so common to us that sometimes we don't get how startling, even offensive, it was at that time. Shepherds were considered the lowest of the low in the social world...because of their jobs they were often dirty, and also they were out in the fields and unable to attend worship, do the ritual cleansing that was part of religious life at that time. Often the youngest child did the shepherding, or the women...those who were of least value.

To call God a shepherd was a radical statement – a bold new way of seeing God – the One who is down with us in the valleys and the fields...not a king, not a warrior but a shepherd....it's pretty powerful.

A shepherd. Who leads with a staff. Walking with us when bad things happen. Helping, guiding, caring for us, going ahead of us into the hardest places. Even the valley of the shadow of death.

There is no place we'll ever have to go – no place

not into a new job

not into a new town

not into a new grade

a different part of your life

not into the operating room

NO PLACE where God has not gone before and waits there for you. You are never alone.

So: if that's what God is like,
if that's who God is for us,
that's also who God asks us to be for others.
Shepherd.

What would it mean for you to be shepherd in your life? With your family – your friends?

What would it mean for us to be a shepherd church? I'm going to suggest five things:

1) Partly it would mean, I think, that the needs of others would be the lens through which we approach people. Looking at people differently. We'd rejoice when people came to our church NOT so we can have more people to keep our church alive, so they can do something for us, but because we truly want to be servant, shepherd to them and their needs.

Shepherding was not then and is not now a glamorous job. Not like the flashy lion trainer...it's an every day commitment to walk with people especially when they're in hard places.

2) It would mean we help when we can help. Not to keep hammering on the dessert theatre, but one of the things we're trying to deal with in the script is how we deal with people when we've been hurt ourselves. Shepherds, when the sheep fall into a hole, or have trouble getting over the rough places, take that staff and do what they can to help.

One of the most helpful mottos I've heard is this: It hurts to hurt and it helps to help. When we've been hurt ourselves sometimes we want to hurt back....we think it's going to make us feel better to punish, to whip....but it doesn't help. It hurts us. It hurts to hurt.

And it helps to help. When we've been hurt, and if we get a chance to help someone....it helps. It does. You help where you can. You take your staff, whatever that is, and you do the things you can do to help.

3) It would mean that ...that we don't expect people to be something they are not. Tigers were not made to jump through flaming hoops. Dogs were not made to walk on their hind legs for our amusement. A shepherd lets the sheep be sheep. They're going to get lost. They're going to run when they're frightened. That's what sheep do.

The shepherd doesn't try to change them but tries to lead them to safer places.

4) Being a shepherd church would mean that when we've found good water or good grazing ...if we've found something that gives us life, we'd say come on try over here. Try this. I'm not sure how good we are at saying – especially when it comes to church – do you find this? We're afraid people will find usI don't know...religious fanatics or something and so we tend not to say, “Hey, I've found this church is really good you ought to come and try it”

And finally, as shepherd church as shepherd people we would give ourselves. We'd not keep at a distance from people and situations, but we'd get to know people, get involved, take risks for them, you let it cost you something of yourself.

That's how God is with us

That's how God asks us to be for others.

Let's be good sheep
and let's be good shepherds.

Amen.