

It's About Time...To Let Go

July 10, 2011

If you could choose the words that others would use in one sentence to describe you, what would they be? Or more specifically, what would you like for them to be? I don't know about you, but that's not an easy question for me to answer. In fact, I came up with several answers, but it was not until I read a description of the man who wrote our Old Testament text this morning that I found the best answer. Unfortunately, it's not a description I have always lived up to, but it's certainly a most worthy goal.

I'm talking about King David, of course. As one scholar put it—"he was the original Renaissance Man, 2000 years before the Renaissance." He was a poet, a musician, a warrior, a king, and a scholar. But most importantly, the Bible says, "...He was a man after God's own heart." However, and this is the part that gives me hope—he was not perfect. He had his weaknesses just like the rest of us. And that, I think, is something we can all identify with!

You see, although we may all wish to be people after God's own heart, we know what it means to fail. But once again there is good news, because like King David, we can also know God's grace and mercy to be sufficient in our lives every day.

For David it was not what he did later in his life that most influenced his outlook on life. Instead it was the job he held when he was a teenage boy. Do you remember what he was? He was a shepherd. He took care of sheep.

Many years later, we're not sure how many, David apparently sat down and wrote his personal statement of faith—something, by the way, that is required when our youth prepare to make their profession of faith which says in their own words what they believe to be essential parts of their faith. Maybe David wrote

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his creed while he was on the battlefield. Or maybe it was when he was hiding from King Saul. Or during the rebellion of his son, Absalom. Maybe it was in celebration of a great victory, or after a crushing defeat—David knew both.

Whatever it's impetus, it has become the most well-known often repeated scripture in the Bible. I'm sure you've already guessed what I'm talking about—Psalm 23 that begins with “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

Although I read it earlier from the New Revised Standard Version translation, I suspect most of you, like me, first learned the King James translation that you see before you on the LCD screens. Will you join me in reading aloud from this translation. Read Psalm 23 (King James Version)

This morning our topic is “It's About Time to Let Go.” If I were to have a one word title for this sermon it would be “contentment”. You see, everybody I know is seeking contentment in their lives. For us to find that contentment I would propose to you that we have to be willing to let some things go. I would further propose to you this morning that this psalm, this personal statement of faith, can give us some practical ideas on how to, when necessary, “let go, and let God”.

Actually it is not just the words of the Psalm but the background behind those words that are important. When David says “the Lord is my shepherd” he is reminding us of an image or metaphor that's found throughout scripture describing our relationship with God as sheep to a shepherd. As early as Genesis 48, Jacob refers to “...the God who has been my shepherd all of my life to this day”. Isaiah said, “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms...”

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And of course in the New Testament we hear Jesus saying, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep...I know my sheep and my sheep know me". (John 10).

At first glance, this analogy paints a beautiful picture. There's nothing cuter than a little lamb—just about every young child has one, but the reality is that it really is not a very flattering analogy. As Phillip Keller points out in his book on this Psalm, "The Shepherd's Psalm" sheep are completely helpless, completely dependent, completely unable to look after themselves. Years ago I visited Cumberland Island off the coast of Georgia and was surprised to learn there were wild horses there that lived on their own and survived on their own. In other places you will find packs of wild dogs who do the same. My grandparents owned a farm and had several barn cats. They never fed them, they caught their own food. Many animals can do this, but you don't hear much about predatory flocks of wild sheep roaming the countryside. That's because sheep, by nature are dependent. They need a shepherd.

Thus when David tells us that the Lord is our shepherd he's reminding us that we too are dependent. We can't make it on our own. We need a caretaker. Of course, it's not fashionable in today's world to be considered weak. I mean, couldn't we say "the Lord is my general and I am his warrior"? Or my favorite..."The Lord is my Co-Pilot". In other words, "I'm still in charge. I'm driving the car, and God can help me if I need it."

It's certainly a more flattering picture for us, but David paints a different picture. One of weakness...helplessness...dependence. Remember the story Jesus told about the one lost sheep. The shepherd goes looking for him; he

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doesn't have to look for the shepherd. This story is actually found in the Old Testament when Ezekiel writes in 34:11:

For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I myself will search for sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep." (Ezekiel 34:11)

Friends, isn't it comforting to know that God is always looking after you? Even when you're wandering around clueless, oblivious to His presence, even when you are not seeking Him, He is seeking you! And yes, I know that there are times when it doesn't feel that way. Believe me, on more than one occasion I have asked, "God where are you? Look at this mess I'm in. Why have you left me alone?"

Of course, being the sheep we are, it's not that God, the shepherd, has wandered away from us, but we have wandered away from the shepherd.

The message from this Psalm and in many other places in the Bible is that God, our good shepherd is looking for all us, especially those who have wandered off—those who are alone and afraid, those who have made mistakes, those who have lost their way—He's looking for you. Listen for the sound of His voice for He is calling your name.

In the sheep/shepherd relationship it is the shepherd who takes the lead. He assumes responsibility for the safety of the flock. Because of this; the sheep doesn't need to worry about the everyday stresses of life. In fact, if we were able to have a conversation with a sheep, you would never hear him or her say, "I'm worried about the future...if there will be pasture in which to feed tomorrow or

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water to drink....or what's gonna happen to us if such and such happens, or doesn't happen."

Sheep don't say this because they know they are under the care of the shepherd, and the shepherd will give them what they need. That is why David was able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Or as the New International Version translates, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."

As I noted earlier, this sermon could have been simply entitled "Contentment". It's a wonderful word, but it doesn't come naturally to us, does it? It is our natural tendency to be in want. We're seldom satisfied. We are always looking for the "perfect something", but when we find it, it's always full of holes and imperfections. That's why Ted Turner said in an interview a long time ago with Barbara Walters, "In the end, success is an empty bag".

Our tendency, I think it's part of our sinful nature, is towards discontent. However, according to King David, to the prophets, and to Jesus, God's plan for us is to be like the sheep in the shepherd's flock and be able to say; "I shall not be in want".

I would suggest to you three things from this Psalm that can help us develop an "I shall not want" lifestyle. The first is this: Look at what you have, not what you don't have. Richard Carlson, in his book "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff" says this:

"There is a way to be happy. It involves changing the emphasis of our thinking from what we want to what we have. Instead of wishing your spouse was different, try thinking about his or hers

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wonderful qualities. Instead of complaining about your salary, be grateful that you have a job...Make a note to yourself to start thinking more about what you have than what you want. If you do, your life will start appearing much better than before..."

The Apostle Paul refers to this attitude in Philippians 4 when he writes, "For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances..." He goes on to say that the secret of his contentment is knowing that he can "do everything through Him (Christ) who gives me strength."

The list of things I don't have is a mile long. No doubt yours is, too. But let us remember that the list of things we do have right now is also long. In my case, much longer than a mile. And the top of that list is a God who loves me warts and all, and who will never abandon me. Someone said, "You won't know that God is all you need until you endure a season in which God is all you have." You see, when we put our trust in Him and know that he will not abandon us, then we are on our way to experiencing contentment in our lives.

Second, measure your life in terms of blessings, not possessions. Max Lucado tells the story about a man in the midst of financial collapse who went to his pastor for counseling. "I've lost everything," he said. The pastor said, "I'm sorry to hear that you've lost your faith." "No," the man said, "I still have my faith." The pastor said, "Then I'm sorry to hear that you've lost your character." The man said, "I never said that. I still have my character." The pastor said, "Then I'm sorry to hear that you've lost your salvation." The man said, "That's not what I said. I didn't lose my salvation." The pastor said, "So you have

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your faith, your character, your salvation. It seems to me that you haven't lost anything that really matters."

I believe that this is what David is referring to when he says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me by still waters; He restores my soul..." When we look at the stuff we've accumulated, some of us have done better than others, but no amount of stuff can replace the intangible blessings of life. Jesus said in Luke 12:15: "Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot."

I encourage you to look for the intangible things in your life. For example, relationships that bring "still water" in your life that provides respite from times of stress and strife. The beauty of a sunrise or sunset, the glory of an unexpected rainbow, the joy that music can bring into our lives, or a good book or a good laugh—these are things you can't put on a balance sheet or a p/l statement, but are things that add meaning to each day. Some of you remember the old hymn "Count your blessings, name them one by one, count your many blessings, see what God has done."—especially those intangible blessings that make life worth living.

Here's the third thing that I believe this Psalm teaches us about being contented: What you really need will come to you when you really need it. David says, "Yea thought I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...thos art with me." One of the lessons of life that I continue to learn is this: "I don't always get as much as I want, but I always get as much as I need." There have been "valley times" in my life when I have demanded things form God, and at the time thought I knew

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what I wanted and needed...and my prayers were not answered in the way I had hoped or expected. But later in hindsight, I could see the hand of God at work, taking care of me and getting me through my own "valley of the shadow of death."

However, there is a footnote I need to add here, some might say, "Well if God's taking care of me, does that mean I don't have any responsibility for getting things done? Of course not. As one commentator on this text said, "There is a difference between being shepherd led and being spoon-fed." Saying "The Lord is my shepherd" doesn't mean you are not responsible for your life. But it does mean you can live each day with the confidence that God is watching over you and will not abandon you in your time of need.

Someone commented to me when I returned from my sabbatical, that they had appreciated my sermons during Lent, particularly being given something concrete to do during the week following. I don't think I can necessarily do that with every sermon, But I think maybe it works for this one.

Thus if you think "It's About Time for You to Let Go" and begin to find some contentment in your life, what I would suggest you do is simple and will take maybe 5 minutes of your day. You can write it on your bulletin, or for this time only you can blog in your iPhone!

For the next 7 days: #1: Memorize verse 1 of Psalm 23-say it every day, at least one or more times a day. #2: Each day for the next 7 days write three material things you're thankful for as they exist right

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now...imperfect as they may be. #3: Each day for the next 7 days, count your blessings—write down three intangible things you're thankful for—things you can't buy or sell but are blessing that God has put in your life. And finally, #4: And this is the tough one—ask God to give you patience to wait until the time is right for Him to answer your prayer, trusting Him to see you through until then.

Friends, if we will do these things and let go of some of the things that burden us, then God can lead us in the path of righteous He would have us go.