

Shepherd Kings

In the opening line of Psalm 23, we hear the words, *"The LORD is my shepherd."* The Hebrew word for LORD (note all capitals in our Bibles) is the name of God, *Yahweh*. The idea that God can be thought of as a shepherd predates David's psalm and was a widely known concept in Ancient Near Eastern culture. Not only gods, but also people of authority – leaders, kings, and military commanders – were often thought of as shepherds.

Shepherding, tending to the flocks, is one of the most ancient occupations. Abel, son of Adam and Eve, we understand, was a shepherd, and millennia later, Moses was a shepherd for the middle third of his life. Because shepherds predated the founding of cities, those who had moved to urban areas often viewed them as being somewhat backward with harsh and unyielding personalities. Shepherds themselves did not enjoy an elevated reputation among the people of civilized places. Yet, kings and other powerful leaders, and sometimes even the gods were understood to be shepherds.

Even though the best shepherds were often viewed as being uncompromising, this was also one of the best characteristics of a good leader. A shepherd must never compromise on the care of his sheep, and a leader (king, general, or even a god) must not be compromising in his care of the people. Uncompromising is often viewed as stubbornness, but, at the same time, the positive side of stubbornness is stalwartness. Shepherds were dependable, something that was a necessary attribute of a king.

But more importantly, a shepherd must give all his attention to his sheep. To do that, most shepherds spent twenty four hours a day with the sheep, even sleeping in an area near the sheepfold, the place where the sheep were bedded in safety for the night. Jesus talks about the sheep knowing the shepherd being willing to follow only the one that they knew, but the shepherd must also know his sheep. A good shepherd will immediately spot illness or injury. He will notice if a sheep is missing. A good shepherd can sense if things are well with the flock or if there is something wrong. If there is something wrong, he will do everything to make it right. The only way a shepherd could do that was to be fully attentive to his sheep.

This is why people often thought of their leaders as shepherds. If their leader, be it a king or a general or a god, was not fully attentive to the needs of his people, the people would suffer. To be attentive, the king would have to live among the people and know the people so well that if something was amiss, he would immediately sense it and make corrections. A good king knew his people, and he was willing to sacrifice his own comforts for them.

We live in a democracy, and in a democracy, it should be that our leaders, who are elected from among us, would be attentive to our needs. Democracy should work because those who hold the power live among us and, we would expect, can sense when things are not well. In a democracy, leaders work for the public good, not their own, for they are part of the public, or at least that is our expectation. We expect our leaders to be like shepherds. We want them to be uncompromising in the care of the people in the nation over which they have authority, providing for the people before looking after themselves.

We become uncomfortable when a leader amasses wealth for himself by taking advantage of his position. This happens far too often in almost every nation in the world.

Whether the leader of a nation is a king or Prime Minister or president, that person is expected to lead as a shepherd, providing for his sheep before he provides for himself. We would be blessed if our political leaders were more like shepherds.

When Jesus began his ministry, his first words were to announce the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. He himself would become the king, sitting at the right hand of his Father in heaven. But Jesus does not often identify himself as a king; rather, the image that comes to mind more than not is of Jesus as a shepherd, a good shepherd. He tells us that a good shepherd would lay down his life for his sheep, meaning that they put the wellbeing of the sheep far above their own. We know Jesus to be uncompromising in this, for this was the reason that he came to this earth. With the Father and the Spirit, Jesus had agreed that the only way to save humanity from their self-inflicted mess was that he die in our place. He laid down his life for his sheep, and he did so by becoming one of us. He was truly the good shepherd.

Jesus' perspective is to ours as well. The only right way for the kingdom of God to become evident on this earth is for the followers of Jesus Christ to be like shepherds. Contrary to the standards that we seem to be willing to accept from political and military leaders and the like, we are called to give up our lives for others. And we must be uncompromising in that. True, we might be viewed by the "civilized" people around us as being backward, but we accept that and conduct ourselves as Jesus taught us rather than giving into the ideals and actions of others. The church is always in danger of becoming worldly in that we would rather look after our own needs first, but that is not the Christian ethic. If we see ourselves as shepherds, following the example of Jesus Christ, against all odds, the kingdom of God will become present in our world.

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