

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year A

RCL Readings – Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10.

ACNA Readings – Acts 6:1-9, 7:2a, 51-60; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:13-25; John 10:1-10.

Introduction. This fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday, the Sunday when the liturgy includes a selection from the Gospel of John passage about Jesus being the Good Shepherd and also other readings with the same theme.

Common Theme. What joy and confidence we can now know, because Jesus laid down his life for the sheep at the first “Easter,” we can come to know eternal life and be assured of his protection and shepherding care, even in the face of danger or hardship. Our readings focus on our Shepherd and our response as his sheep, particularly through suffering, but also in our fellowship with and care for his flock.

Acts 2:42-47. Devoted Fellowship. This short passage – after the passion, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus and followed by the miraculous baptism and initiation of the church by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – gives a powerful glimpse of the transformation that resulted in the lives of individuals and the community of Messiah-followers. The Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep yields a community of believers who devote themselves to God and caring for his people. This is not simply human friendship but Spirit-motivated “fellowship” (koinonia), the same root word as in v. 44: “having all things in common (koina).” What a lovely combination of features in their early gatherings: teaching by the apostles and spiritual fellowship as a new community, and meals that included remembering the Lord’s sacrifice for them and prayer. Sacred church buildings, liturgies, and communion utensils often emerged over time, but it may help to visualize this scene as a company of people meeting in homes or in the temple courts, and eating meals – called agape meals – together.

It tells us that this joyful, praising, fellowship of worshippers were meeting publicly in the temple courts, so we need to recognise that these first believers in Yeshua as Messiah were Jews and there was no conflict with continued worship and witness in the temple courts (as in 3:1–10; 5:21, 42; 21:26–30; 22:17 JANT).

Their fellowship was not just expressed in their gatherings but also overflowed beyond the gatherings in caring for and sacrificial giving to those in need – sharing finances and food with others in the new community.

Psalm 23. The LORD is my Shepherd. This reading is probably the most famous passage in the Bible. Even those who rarely, if ever, attend a church, have probably heard this Psalm read in school or at some family funeral. In the first part, the psalmist portrays the LORD as a shepherd who provides for his needs and protects him from danger (also see Ps 95:7). The Shepherd is a frequent biblical and Ancient Near Eastern metaphor for royalty (Isa 40:11; Ezek 34; Ps 80), as we see with David and Moses and Hammurabi (JSB). In verses five through six, the metaphor changes as the psalmist depicts a luxurious royal banquet hosted by the LORD. Psalm 78:19 refers to the first

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exodus generation who challenged God whether he could spread a table for them in the wilderness (JSB). In contrast here, the trusting psalmist is a guest of honour and recipient of divine favour, who enjoys unlimited access to the divine palace and the divine presence (NET Psalm 23, note 1).

Here we will apply some insights from biblical poetry and Hebrew parallelism to this well-known psalm, to see if we can learn something fresh. Given space, we will just outline the structure, and leave you to consider the spiritual implications (also see the NET footnotes for details on the Hebrew nuances of the wording).

Psalm 23 – The LORD is my Shepherd

<p>1a Yahweh (is) my shepherd 1b I will not be in need</p>	<p>A. Proclaiming Trust</p>
<p>2a In pastures of fresh grass he causes me to lie down 2b Beside water of resting places / tranquil waters He leads me 3a My soul/whole being he refreshes / restores 3b He guides me in paths of righteousness / right paths 3c (All) for the sake of his name</p>	<p>B. Proof Horizontal – ‘He’</p>
<p>4a Even though I may walk through a death-shadow ravine 4b I will not fear evil</p>	<p>A. Proclaiming Trust</p>
<p>5a Because you are with me 5b Your rod and staff they comfort me / give me reassurance 6a You set in order in front of me a table as my enemies look on 6b You anoint with oil my head 6c My cup is saturated / well-filled (with blessings)</p>	<p>B. Proof Vertical – ‘You’</p>
<p>7a Surely, goodness and love shall pursue me all the days of my life 7b And I will dwell in the house of Yahweh, for length of days</p>	<p>A. Proclaiming Trust</p>

The text is set out here in a literal translation from the Hebrew text in parallel lines (adapted from Tappy), reflecting the parallelism of the Hebrew – so not 6 verses, as in our English Bibles, but 7 paired lines, each pair called a bi-colon. The first thing to notice is that there are three pairs, the backbone of the psalm, labelled *A*, one pair at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end – pairs 1, 4 and 7. These pairs all proclaim the psalmist’s trust in the LORD as his Shepherd, with the first two expressed in the negative, literally “Not I will ...” and the third expressed in the positive, “and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

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The second thing to notice is the two *B* sections. Both *B* sections are made up of four lines, or better, two pairs of parallel lines. In the first *B* section (vv. 2–3), the psalmist sets out proof – his evidence from experience – for why he feels safe in the LORD's shepherding care. The psalmist speaks in the third person about the LORD's care – *he* causes me to lie down, *he* leads me, *he* restores me, *he* guides me – as if giving testimony to those around him. But the second *B* section changes, the psalmist speaks about the LORD's care in the second person – *you* are with me, *your* rod and staff, *you* set in order a table, *you* anoint my head, as if addressing God. If we ask what changed the psalmist from speaking in the third person to speaking in the second person, the answer comes in line 4 – going through dark valleys, not only death but death-like, dark experiences! (NET, note 10). Alter translates it as: “the vale of death's shadow.” This so resonates with our reality. Isn't it true that our relationship with the LORD is deepened and becomes so much more personal when we walk close to him during the dark valleys of life, and as we sense the touch of his rod and staff on our shoulders in the darkness, comforting and reassuring us of his presence?

And finally, we notice that there are two lines left dangling, at the end of the two *B* sections – labelled *C* here. The first one in verse three is “for the sake of his name,” and it closes the first half of the psalm. So, why can the psalmist be so confident that the Shepherd will provide for him (*A*), well because of his experience of the LORD's provision (*B*). But why does the Shepherd provide for his sheep in such a consistent manner? Is it because of the faithfulness of the sheep? No, of course, we know this is not the case. It is “for the sake of his name.” On the physical level, the “name” here refers to the shepherd's reputation – he will guide the flock in the right paths because he values his reputation amongst other shepherds and those who may hire him (NET, note 9). But on the metaphorical level, the divine Shepherd is bound to take care of us, only and always, “for the sake of his name.” Yahweh's name and glory is at stake here. The divine Shepherd will always be faithful and provide for his sheep, because he has promised to do so, and doing so honours him! You might call this *the Primary Reason* for our trust. What a certain foundation this is for our confidence – not in our faithfulness or otherwise, but because of his Name! Interestingly, the first word in the psalm is YHWH, and the almost-last word in the psalm is YHWH, and the middle phrase in the psalm, at the close of the first half, is “all for the sake of his NAME”!

Finally, the second *C* section, in verse six, says: “My cup is saturated or well-filled.” There is a potential textual issue here, as the Greek translation says: “Your cup satiates as the best [wine].” So, is it “my cup” or “your cup”? One thing that tips it in the favour of the latter is the shift, as we have said, from third-person in the first half of the psalm to second-person in the second half. In the first *B* section, all four lines are about *he* and it closes in line three *C* with “all for the sake of his name.” Now here, in the second *B* section, all four lines are about *you* so it would be consistent to close with “your cup satiates like the best”? And, there is evidence from archaeology (see Tappy) that victorious kings are depicted holding a cup and pouring wine of blessing on their people. We may not be certain which way to translate this, but both, of course, are true! My Shepherd-king certainly pours his cup of blessing upon me; therefore I can drink from my cup of blessing and be satiated!

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1 Peter 2:13-25. The Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. This reading is mainly focused on suffering for doing right. Peter argues for the testimony of the Christians during suffering: “Their behaviour must be blameless, as it reflects on the community as a whole” (JANT). At the close, the passage sets before us the example of the Messiah, who suffered for us and left us an example so that we would follow in his steps. Even if we are made to suffer unjustly we are called to act righteously as we follow the example of our Lord Jesus. The passage is all the more moving “when one remembers how Peter once rebuked his Master for saying that the Messiah had to suffer, be crucified, and rise again (Matt. 16:21–23; Mark 8:31–33)” (Beale).

In verses 22–25, Peter quotes and alludes to Isaiah 53 again and again, the fourth of the so-called Servant Songs of Isaiah, as listed below.

1 Peter 2	Quote or Allusion <i>(italics showing allusions)</i>	Isaiah 53 (LXX)
22	He did not commit sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth	9
23	When he was reviled, <i>he did not retaliate</i> , when he suffered <i>he did not make threats</i> , but instead <i>trusted</i> <i>the one who judges justly.</i>	7c 7d 4a, 12 8a
24	He himself bore our sins in his own body, <i>on the tree</i>	12 4 (Deut 21:23)
24	By his wounds you have been healed	5 (LXX and MT have ‘we’)
25	For you were like wandering sheep	6a (again, ‘we’)

Jewish interpreters tend to see Isaiah 53 as alluding to Israel as the Suffering Servant of the LORD, and “like the sacrificial lamb, suffering on behalf of others who are straying *like sheep*. Probably emerging from the period after Israel’s exile, the passage gives meaning to Israel’s suffering as redemptive or instructive” (JANT). The Targum to Isaiah 53 adds the words “the Messiah” after “my servant,” but the date of the Targum is disputed, and the notion of vicarious suffering appears to be relatively late within Judaism (e.g., 4 Macc 6:27–29; 17:22; 18:4; less clearly, 2 Macc 7:37–38) (Beale). The silence of this Lamb can be contrasted with the loud threats made by the famous martyrs in 2 Macc 7:17, 19, 31, 31, 35; 4 Macc 10–13.

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“The Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” may also be referring to Isa 40:10–11; Ezek 34; Ps 23. In Ezek 34:11–13, the Septuagint indicates the shepherd “will oversee them” and bring them back from every place “where they were scattered.” Peter does not hesitate in identifying this Shepherd and Overseer as the Lord Jesus, joining the apostle John in insisting that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. And Beale adds:

Once again Peter’s high Christology enables him to identify OT passages describing Yahweh’s activity as the activity of none other than Jesus Christ. Peter’s reading of Isa 52:13–53:12 and its outworking in Jesus’ passion and vindication is of a piece with his understanding of God’s prophetic purpose to call out a new Israel bound together and redeemed by the Suffering Servant, whose wounds are alone sufficient to effect the healing of the nations.

Isaiah 53 appears to refer to an individual and Peter clearly applies the passage here to the Messiah. Peter says we all were like sheep going astray, but now we have returned to the shepherd and overseer of our souls. Not only has our Messiah dealt a death blow to our sins on the cross, but he now becomes our shepherd and guardian. We can live without sin now and live for righteousness as we follow his example, even if it includes suffering. In being servants of the Lord, we are to “show proper respect to everyone and love the brotherhood” (2:17).

John 10:1-10. This Gospel reading is why this particular Sunday in the Christian calendar is called Good Shepherd Sunday. The passage alludes to biblical shepherds such as Moses (Exod 3:1) and David (e.g., 2 Sam 5:2) and ultimately, as in another of our readings, to God himself (Gen 48:15; 49:24; Ps 23:1; 29:9; 77:20; 78:52; 80:1; Isa 40:11; Jer 31:9; Ezek 34:11–31). God’s people are “the sheep of his pasture” (e.g., Ps 74:1; 78:52; 79:13; 95:7; 100:3; Ezek 34:31; also in Israel’s final restoration Isa 49:9–10; and in their deliverance from the nations Ezek 34:12–15).

NET says: “There was more than one type of sheepfold in use in Palestine in Jesus’ day. The one here seems to be a courtyard in front of a house (the Greek word used for the sheepfold here, αὐλή [aulē] frequently refers to a courtyard), surrounded by a stone wall (often topped with briars for protection)” (NET, note 2).

The “thieves and bandits” (vv. 1, 8) and the “hired hand” (v. 12) may be hinting at unfaithful religious leaders in Israel (past or present) and alluding to Ezek 34:2–4. As this Good Shepherd discourse appears to continue directly from chapter 9 about the healing of the blind man, the antagonism of the Pharisees towards the blind man and his parents, and their angry expulsion of him in 9:34 could be “the dark backdrop of Jesus’ Good Shepherd Discourse” (Beale). Ultimately the “thief” must be the evil one himself, who “comes only to steal, and kill and destroy.”

As Shepherd, the sheep hear his voice and follow him (Num 27:15–18; Ps 80:1; Ezek 34:13). Moses in Numbers 27:15–17 predicts a successor and that passage can be taken as a typological allusion to the Messiah (applied to Jesus in Matt 9:36). Numbers 27:18 shows Joshua (Greek = Jesus) is Moses’

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successor. Israel's exodus from Egypt is sometimes portrayed as God leading his people as a flock (Ps 77:20; Isa 63:11, 14; Ps 78:52), and likewise also in the end times (Mic 2:12–13) (Beale). Also, Jesus is the Gate, and the sheep enter and are saved. This may pick up the messianic reading of Psalm 118:20: "This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous enter."

ACNA Readings

Acts 6:1-9, 7:2a, 51-60. Hellenists and Hebrews. The connection between this reading and "Good Shepherd Sunday" is not obvious. The verses from 6:1-9 are a dramatic example of the care the early church showed towards its members. JANT says: "Problems threatening to divide the community are resolved." Maybe the connection of the second part of the reading, from chapter 7, is to show the way Stephen was willing to follow his Lord in also laying his life down for the gospel.

The first part of the reading is about a conflict in the church between the *Hellenists* and the *Hebrews* over the daily distribution of resources. The first group were Jews who had adopted, to some degree, Greek thought, customs, lifestyle and language. This was aided by the influence of the scriptures in Greek (the Septuagint, LXX) from Alexandria in Egypt. The *Hebrews* on the other hand were Jews who spoke Aramaic and were more culturally aligned with Jerusalem and Jewish tradition. The differences in language here are like a metaphor for us – many of our relational difficulties come from our differences in *language* and worldview!

NET highlights that "The care of widows is a major biblical theme: Deut 10:18; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19–21; 26:12–13; 27:19; Isa 1:17–23; 10:1–3; Jer 7:6; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5" (NET, note 5; and JANT). The expression "to serve tables" or "daily serving" (*diakonia*) could mean the serving of food at meals, but more likely it means the allocation of funds from those who gave financial gifts to the church, as in 2:44–45 (see also the use of *diakonia* as financial relief in 11:29 and 12:25). Choosing seven reflects the comment by Josephus, "Let there be seven men to judge in every city, and these such as have been before most zealous in the exercise of virtue and righteousness." (Antiquities. 4.214). The characteristic required, "full of the Spirit," is also used of the artisan Bezalel who built the tabernacle (Exod 31:3; 35:31), and the "laying on of hands" to confer authority reflects what was done with Joshua (Num 27:18, 23). "Note how many of the names in this list are Greek. This suggests that Hellenists were chosen to solve the problem they had been so sensitive about fixing" (NET, note 20). Note too that Stephen and Philip, at least, also pray and preach elsewhere in Acts (6:8–8:1; 8:5–40; 21:8).

This first section of the book of Acts closes (6:7) the first of five section breaks in Acts about the spread of the word of God and the increase of believers (also 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20). The verbs "grew" and "multiplied" are used of Israel in Egypt, referring to Exod 1:7. So the growth of Israel at the time of the exodus is reflected here in the growth of the church, like a new exodus. As this section has been focused on Jerusalem, there is mention of priests also believing.

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Stephen's speech in chapter seven is saturated with material from the Hebrew Scriptures but it is not till the end that there are obvious citations (7:42, 48). Using historical surveys like Stephen's is common in the Hebrew Scriptures and Hebraic literature (e.g., Deut 6:20–24; 26:5–9; Josh 24:2–13; Neh 9:6–31; Jdt 5:6–18; 1 Macc 2:52–60). Stephen's final words echo those of Jesus (Luke 23:34, 46), and he also intercedes for his killers – reflecting the words of Isa 53:12.

We may find some of Stephen's words strange and harsh to our modern ears, but he is using language from the Hebrew Scriptures and current in Judaism. "Stiff-necked" is used of the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 32:9; 33.3, 5; 34:9; Deut 9:6 13), and "uncircumcised in heart and ears" is found in Leviticus 26:41; Jerimiah 6:10; Ezekiel 44:7, 9.

Stephen picks up the theme of Isaiah 63 of God's mercies – his saving angel and the Holy Spirit – despite Israel's rebellion and provoking of the Holy Spirit; so he powerfully compares Israel's past behaviour with their contemporary behaviour.

Stephen is not making up this accusation of Israel persecuting and killing the prophets (1 Kgs 19:10, 14; 2 Chron 36:16; Neh 9:26; Jer 26:20–24). He focuses specifically on the slaying of the prophets who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and this was clearly an allusion to Isaiah and the righteous servant of Isaiah 53 (Beale). Stephen's speech refers to the tabernacle in the wilderness and the establishment of a permanent dwelling place for God in the temple, but then turns to argue God does not live in a man-made house and that Israel all along had been rejecting the law and acting idolatrously. He seems to be responding to the charge that Jesus would destroy the temple, and the implication is that the new house of God is now being composed of his people (Beale). "Stephen answers the original question (6:13–7:1) by turning the tables on his accusers. He is not guilty of saying things against the Torah (6:13); rather they are the ones who continually violate it." (JANT).

The God of glory who appeared to Abram (7:2) now appears to Stephen (v. 55), and he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God (based on Ps 110:1). Jesus standing rather than sitting implies impending action on behalf of his servant. Seeing the heavens opened (as in Luke 3:21) and the Son of Man strikingly identifies Jesus with the exalted figure in Daniel 7:13–14.

His cry "Receive my spirit" also occurs in Ps 31:5 and is similar to the final words of the Lord Jesus (Luke 23:34, 46). There, Jesus' words were addressed to the Father, but now Stephen addresses them to Jesus himself!

Further Reading

- Alter: *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (3 vols): Robert Alter
- Beale, G.K., & Carson, Donald A. (Eds.). (2007). *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Baker Publishing Group.
- **JANT**: Levine, A.J., & Brettler, M.Z. (2011). *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Oxford University Press.
- **JSB**: Berlin, Adele, Brettler, Marc Z., & Fishbane, Michael A. (Eds.). (2004). *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. Oxford University Press.

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- **NET:** *The NET Bible: Translation and Notes* (2019). Thomas Nelson.
- Tappy, Ron. (1995). "Psalm 23: Symbolism and Structure." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 57(2), 255–280. https://www.academia.edu/38889742/Psalm_23_Symbolism_and_Structure

About the author. Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010-2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.