

## **Easter 4 A 2020**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 3, 2020

Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

My first exposure to classical music was in the Disney movie *Fantasia*. An animated film made famous by Mickey Mouse playing the Sorcerer's Apprentice. It was a film which opened with a grand version of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*. In a symphonic arrangement by Leopold Stokowski. And later in that movie was the opening movement of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. Every boy my age had heard of Beethoven's *Fifth* Symphony. But in *Fantasia* it was Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. The Pastoral, or *pastorale*.

I didn't fully understand the meaning of that word. But the Disney animation had all kinds of mythical Greek creatures frolicking on the hillsides and in the skies and on the water. By Beethoven's time, the *Pastorale* was a music genre that explored the peaceful beauty of nature. In painting, pastoral scenes meant paintings of hills and trees and ponds. Perhaps a windmill or a silo. Scenes of mankind in harmony with nature.

You might think that this was a modern obsession. That in the days of industrialization, in the world of factories and urban blight described in the novels of Charles Dickens, you might think that the Romantics were sick of the city and imagined idealized views of the countryside. And that is definitely the case. But the first people to write pastoral literature were the ancient Greeks. They were the ones who invented the term "golden age." And they thought that in the past, things had once been good, and human beings had been in balance with nature. The Bible has the story of the Garden of Eden, a golden age in which the first two humans lived happily and peacefully tending to a garden and overseeing its life. In Greek mythology, there was a romantic past called Arcadia which was an unspoiled natural paradise. And often the principal human beings allowed into such places were shepherds. Known in Latin as *pastors*.

My official title is Minister of Word and Sacrament. But the office I hold is the office of pastor, or shepherd. The word *pastor* is related to the word *pasture* because both involve feeding sheep. The word *pastorale* in terms of art and music and literature refers to scenes of the country or even the wilderness, unspoiled by humankind, and where humans live in harmony with nature as exemplified by the shepherd or the goatherd.

Now in the Bible, in the Jewish and Christian tradition, shepherds can represent more than one concept, not just harmony from a golden age. In biblical literature, shepherds are almost always stand-ins for rulers. For kings. There are good shepherds and bad shepherds. Jesus warns in

today's gospel of the risk of the sheep posed by thieves and bandits who want to steal them away. This is a reference to leaders. Perhaps political and government leaders. Perhaps religious leaders. But leaders who do not have the best interests of their people. Leaders who exploit God's people for their own ends. We can see plenty of that in our own day and time. But bad shepherds were a concern as far back as the prophet Ezekiel, whom God accused with these words: *You have NOT strengthened the weak, you have NOT healed the sick, you have NOT bound up the injured, you have NOT brought back the strayed, you have NOT sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.* So the Bible has this idea of bad shepherds as well as good ones. And they are symbols of human leaders. The bad ones who exploit. And the good ones who care.

But there is a particular shepherd who represents the Golden Age of Israel. A shepherd boy, actually, who became king. The Bible says he was short. And he was the youngest of all his brothers. And his name was David. David was very flawed and very human, and his sins and his dysfunctional family system are recorded in the Bible. But he was also quite awesome. He was the lad who took down Goliath the Philistine with his shepherd boy slingshot. Saul tried to give David a helmet and a coat of mail and a sword. And it was too heavy for the boy. So he went off to face Goliath with a shepherd's staff, a slingshot, and five stones. It only took one.

That shepherd boy united the divided twelve tribes of Israel. He forged them into one nation. And he established a new capital for that nation. The city of Jerusalem, which stands to this very day, three thousand years later, having outlasted three major world empires that tried to destroy it. King David of Judah. Now *that* was a shepherd! And in the centuries that followed, with calamity and defeat and conquest, the Jewish memory never forgot David. And the Jewish memory yearned for him, or someone like him to return. To take on the new Goliaths, because there is always another one.

And that, friends, is what it means when the moment came that the angel did not appear to the wealthy or the wise, the powerful or the political. The angel appeared when the time was right to shepherds in the very fields outside Bethlehem where the boy had tended his own sheep. *To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

From that shepherd boy who became the king who symbolized Camelot who embodied the principle that Right makes Might and that the weak are not always prey to the strong. From that shepherd boy came the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. The Lord is my shepherd.

The great shepherd king put into even greater words how we're all just sheep. Being led through this life by one great Power. We're prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love. But his rod and his staff keep us from destroying ourselves through our own stupidity. And life has its green pastures, and life has its treacherous box canyons. But he leads through many dangers and toils and snares. And the road is long, but he leads us to the cool still waters. And so we rely on him. And he is reliable.

David could take down Goliath and unite the tribes of Israel, and establish a city on the hill of Zion. But David knew whose he was. And David knew upon whom he relied. And David knew where to put his trust. And his psalm about it is the most well-known piece of the Bible— with the possible exception of the Lord's Prayer.

We're going to sing the Scottish translation of David's psalm. The Scots know a few things about sheep and shepherds. And when the Scots produced the version we're going to sing, they took the King James Version which had been in existence for about a half century, and they decided to improve on it. The King James Version being English, you know. And them being Scots, you know.

*Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,  
yet will I fear no ill:*

*For thou art with me; and thy rod  
and staff me comfort still.*

Aye. Amen.