

Sermon: Living in the House of God – Forever      Rev. Esther Irish

Most of us know this PSALM as opening with the proud, joyous statement, "The Lord is my Shepherd."

It closes with the equally positive, buoyant affirmation, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Here is a sheep so utterly satisfied with its lot in life, so fully contented with the care it receives, so much "at home" with the shepherd that there is not a shred of desire for a change.

Stated in simple, direct, rather rough ranch language it would be put like this, "Nothing will ever make me leave this outfit-it's great!"

Conversely on the shepherd's side there has developed a great affection and devotion to his flock. He would never think of parting with such a sheep. Healthy, contented, productive sheep are his delight and profit. So strong are the bonds between them that it is forever.

The word "house" used here in the poem has wider meaning than most people could attach to it. Normally we speak of the house of the Lord as the sanctuary or church or meeting place of God's people. In one sense David may have had this in mind. And, of course, it is pleasant to think that one would always delight to be found in the Lord's house.

But it must be kept in mind always, that the Psalmist, writing from the standpoint of a sheep, is reflecting on and recounting the full round of the year's activities for the flock.

He has taken us from the green pastures and still waters of the home ranch, up through the mountain passes onto the high tablelands of the summer range. Fall has come with its storms and rain and sleet that drives the sheep down the foothills and back to the home ranch for the long, quiet winter. In a sense this is coming home. It is a return to the fields and corrals and barns and shelters of the owner's home. During all seasons of the year, with their hazards, dangers and disturbances, it is the rancher's alertness, care and energetic management that has brought the sheep through satisfactorily.

It is with a sublime feeling of both composure and contentment that this statement, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever," is made.

Actually what is referred to by "house" is the family or household or flock of the Good Shepherd. The sheep is so deeply satisfied with the flock to which it belongs, with the ownership of this particular shepherd that it has no wish to change whatever.

It is as if it had finally come home again and was now standing at the fence, bragging to its less fortunate neighbors on the other side. It boasts about the wonderful year it has had and its complete confidence in its owner. ///

Sometimes I feel we Christians should be much more like this. We should be proud to belong to Christ. Why shouldn't we feel free to boast to others of how good our Shepherd is? How glad we should be to look back and recall all the amazing ways in

which He has provided for our welfare. We should delight to describe, in detail, the hard experiences through which He has brought us. And we should be eager and quick to tell of our confidence in Christ. We should be bold to state fearlessly that we are so glad we are His. By the contentment and serenity of our lives we should show what a distinct advantage it is to be a member of His "household," of His flock. ///

James Keller in "A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23" could never meditate on this last phrase in the Psalm without there welling up in his memory vivid scenes from some of the early days on his first sheep ranch.

As winter, with its cold rains and chilling winds came on, his neighbor's sickly sheep would stand huddled at the fence, their tails to the storm, facing the rich fields in which his flock flourished. Those poor, abused, neglected creatures under the ownership of a heartless rancher had known nothing but suffering most of the year. With them there had been gnawing hunger all summer. They were thin and sickly with disease and scab and parasites. Tormented by flies and attacked by predators, some were so weak and thin and wretched that their thin legs could scarcely bear their scanty frames.

Always there seemed to lurk in their eyes the slender, faint hope that perhaps with a bit of luck they could break through the fence or crawl through some hole to free themselves. Occasionally this used to happen, especially around Christmas. This was the time

of extreme tides when the sea retreated far out beyond the end of the fence lines which ran down to it. The neighbor's emaciated, dissatisfied, hungry sheep would wait for this to happen. Then at the first chance they would go down on the tidal flats; slip around the end of the fence and come sneaking in to gorge themselves on his rich green grass.

So pitiful and pathetic was their condition that the sudden feast of lush feed, to which they were unaccustomed, often proved disastrous. Their digestive systems would begin to sour and sometimes this led to death. Keller recalls clearly coming across three of his neighbor's ewes lying helpless under a fir tree near the fence one drizzly day. They were like three old, limp, gray, sodden sacks collapsed in a heap. Even their bony legs would no longer support them.

He loaded them into a wheelbarrow and wheeled them back to their heartless owner, who simply pulled out a sharp killing knife and slit all three of their throats. He couldn't care less.

What a picture of Satan who holds ownership over so many.

Compare that to the graphic account of Jesus portraying Himself as being the door and entrance by which sheep were to enter His fold.

Those poor sheep had not come into Keller's ranch through the proper gate. He had never let them in. They had never really become his. They had not come under his ownership or control. If they had, they would not have suffered so. Even starting out

under his management they would have been given very special care. First they would have been put on dry, limited rations, then they would gradually have been allowed green feed until they were adjusted to the new diet and mode of life.

In short, they tried to get in on their own. It simply spelled disaster. What made it doubly sad was that they were doomed anyway. On the old impoverished ranch they would have starved to death that winter.

It is the same with those apart from Christ. The old world is a pretty wretched ranch and Satan is a heartless owner. He doesn't care for people's souls or welfare. Under his tyranny there are hundreds of hungry, discontented hearts who long to enter into the household of God-who ache for His care and concern. /////

Yet there is only one way into this fold. That way is through the owner, Christ Himself-the Good Shepherd. He boldly declared, "Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures."

*(John 10:9)./// As a Shepherd is totally present for his sheep, Jesus is giving us full assurance and a sense of safety, because He desires to be fully present with us! /////*

Dave Kinney tells his readers that *The Hebrew word "Hiya" (like a karate chop!) literally means, "I want you to be",// Just be!// Isn't that weird! // Folks, we don't know how to "hiya!" - be totally present with God! How many great moments in our relationships in life have been missed because we failed to Hiya!*

*The greatest secrets in life no matter what you do...is to be totally there, be fully present! ////*

Almost every day we are literally rubbing shoulders with men and women "on the other side of the fence." What is our impact upon them? Do they find that we are present with them? Is our life so serene, so satisfying, so radiant because we walk and talk and live with God, that they become envious? Do they see in us the benefits of being under Christ's control? Do they see something of Himself reflected in our conduct and character? Do our lives and conversation lead them to Him-and thus into life everlasting? If so, then we may be sure some of them will also long to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And there is no reason why this cannot happen if they come under His proper ownership. /////

There is one other beautiful and final sense in which the psalmist was speaking as a sheep. It is brought out in the Amplified Old Testament where the meaning of this last phrase is, "I will dwell in the 'presence' of the Lord forever."

This is the most significant sentiment that David had in his heart as he ended this hymn of praise to divine diligence.

Not only do we get the idea of an ever-present Shepherd on the scene, but also the concept that the sheep wants to be in full view of his owner at all times.

We are promised the alertness, the awareness, the diligence of a never-tiring master which alone assures the sheep of excellent care. And from the sheep's stand-point it is knowing that the

shepherd is there; it is the constant awareness of his presence nearby that automatically eliminates most of the difficulties and dangers while at the same time providing a sense of security and serenity.

It is the sheep owner's presence that guarantees there will be no lack of any sort; that there will be abundant green pastures; that there will be still, clean waters; that there will be new paths into fresh fields; that there will be safe summers on the high table-lands; that there will be freedom from fear; that there will be antidotes for flies and disease and parasites; that there will be quietness and contentment.

In our Christian lives and experience precisely the same idea and principle applies. For when all is said and done on the subject of a successful Christian walk, it can be summed up in one sentence. "Live ever aware of God's presence."

There is the "inner" consciousness, which can be very distinct and very real, of Christ's presence in my life, made evident by His gracious Holy Spirit within. It is He who speaks to us in distinct and definite ways about our behavior. For our part it is a case of being sensitive and responsive to that inner voice.

There can be a habitual awareness of Christ within us; empowering us to live a noble and richly rewarding life in cooperation with Himself. As we respond to Him and move in harmony with His wishes we discover life becomes satisfying and worthwhile. It acquires great serenity and is made an exciting adventure of

fulfillment as we progress in it. This is made possible as we allow His gracious Spirit to control, manage and direct our daily decisions. In fact, we should deliberately ask for His direction even in mi-nute details. //

Then there is the wider but equally thrilling awareness of God all around us. We live surrounded by His presence. We become open individuals, living life open to His scrutiny. He is conscious of every circumstance we encounter. He attends us with care and concern because we belong to Him. And this will continue through eternity. What an assurance!

I shall dwell in the presence (in the care of) the Lord forever.

\\\\\\

*Being totally presence with God brings the cutting edge difference in our lives! That's the key to the abundant overflowing life! Until we are totally present with God, our walk will continue to be shallow and skimpy!*

- *Sabbath the 4th commandment... Exodus 20:8-11*

*So you say what does that have to do with me? Folks if we are going to be fully present (Hiya Principle) it starts on Sunday! I ask, is there anytime during a 24 hour period that you are unavailable? Cell phones off, T.V. off, computer off, video games off... blackberries, blueberries.*

*So you say, "why is this so important?" Because remember, Jesus told us "Don't worry, don't be anxious" - when we're in God's*

*presence, we are not looking back, we are not looking forward but right up at God!*

*There has to be a time when we shut down everything in our lives and just be... Find a Sabbath - it's the once a week "Hiya Principle"!*

*This one principle will make you 10 times more effective during the other 6 days! And that's the cutting edge we need to be powerful for Jesus!*

*The fact is, most of our homes are so addicted to adrenalin and it's tearing our society and our Christianity apart!*

*Being fully present with God is the best gift you can give to yourself and to your family! Now you realize there may be some change that has to come our way if we are going to practice "The Hiya Principle"!*

*Then and only then do we sense that God will make a way in the tough times, then and only then will we sense the touch of God in the deepest places of our lives, then and only then will we sense the leadership of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis!*