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Psalm 23 is one of the most beloved passages in the Bible. I’ve also loved the beautiful and thought-provoking poem.

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

I’ve read and reflected on this poem continually since my childhood, but I couldn’t fully understand its meaning until I came to Australia. For I had never seen the sheep in South Korea. Since the geographical features of Korea aren’t suitable for raising the sheep, it’s very hard to find them except in some limited regions.

It was so impressive to see the sheep in vast fields in Australia, so I stopped my car many times to watch them at close range. However, whenever I observed them closely, my illusion of the sheep was broken to pieces. Above all, they weren’t clean and white as seen in the pictures.

Their fleeces were muddy and dirty, and they were very smelly. They looked fearful and cautious, and quite defenceless; they weren’t fast runners, and they didn’t look smart as well. I also heard that the sheep is weak-sighted, disoriented, and nevertheless even stubborn.

Then, I could realise what the shepherd means to the sheep. For them, the shepherd means safety and guidance; without the shepherd they cannot live well.

[2]

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus called himself the good shepherd for us. In verse 11, he said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Moreover, in the next verse, Jesus mentioned about the hired man as well: “The hired hand isn’t the shepherd and doesn’t own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.”

What’s remarkable is that the core difference between the shepherd and the hired man is ownership according to the passage. People might think that owning the sheep is like possessing them as you would possess such things as car, house, or money. But, at this Jesus didn’t talk about ownership as possession, but about ownership as relation.

Relational ownership creates emotional responsibility, so when we have relational ownership toward some beings, we can be kind, accepting, compassionate, and empathetic to them. The true shepherd builds a solid association with his sheep based on emotional responsibility through relational ownership.

So the shepherd can willingly take a risk to protect his beloved sheep. Likewise, the good shepherd requires a strong interconnection with the sheep more than anything else.

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Although Jesus comes and serves us as the faithful shepherd, if we ignore him, the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep cannot be formed. Jesus’ saying, “I’m the good shepherd,” isn’t a one-way proclamation. Instead, it is an invitation for us to be a good sheep. It’s like that Jesus says to us, “I’m willing to be the shepherd for you. Are you ready to follow me?”

Jesus talked about the most crucial attitude of the sincere sheep in today’s scripture. In verses 4-5 he said, “After the shepherd has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don’t know his voice.”

Recognition of the shepherd’s voice was mentioned as a critical feature of the true-hearted sheep. The good flock recognise their shepherd’s voice clearly and follow only him. Then, the sheep can create a healthy bond with their shepherd.

The main point of Jesus’ speech in today’s Gospel reading is showing his wish to make a trustful community with his people. Jesus made it clear in verses 14 and 15: “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the father – and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Yes, he wanted to create a loving relationship with his beloved people as he did with God the father; he wanted to make a life-sustaining community with them to guide and save them, and furthermore through them he hoped to reveal the life-giving way to all the people in the world.

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Building such life-sustaining community based on mutual respect and responsibility was the key purpose of Jesus’ discipleship on earth. But, at first his purpose seemed to have failed. His disciples denied and abandoned him; they scattered being afraid of the Jewish leaders, and returned back to their hometown to live their previous life again.

However, at the place of failure a wonderful miracle occurred. That is the transformation of Jesus’ followers after their encountering the resurrected Jesus. I think that is one of the most surprising miracles recorded in the Bible because their whole being was totally changed. You know, it’s extremely hard that a human being changes his or her way of life at once.

Now, they could finally recognise their shepherd’s voice; they could follow only Jesus risking their lives for the sake of the kingdom of God. They eventually became the sincere sheep building a trustful community with their master.

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The early church community recorded in today’s first Bible reading, Acts 2:42-47, is the first fruit that they bore as a good flock. Verses 46-47 reported, “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

They became a channel of salvation. This is what Jesus wanted his disciples to do as his flock. This story teaches us that being a good sheep is still what we should be concerned with the most. Discerning our shepherd’s voice, following him, and building a meaningful relationship with him should be our primary concerns as a Christian.

Serving our community and helping our neighbours are also important jobs, but we must be aware that without discerning Jesus’ voice and will toward us, without a personal companionship with him, our good deeds would have nothing to do with his mission and ministry.

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About 15 years ago Yoo Mi and I made a trip to Grampians National Park. On the way home in Melbourne, we stopped at Ballarat to have dinner. It was our first visit there. When we left the town, it was already dark and I tried to find a way to M1 highway looking up Melway as there was no smartphone at that time.

We drove about 20 minutes, but couldn’t find the lamp to M1 highway to Melbourne. I started to worry, but didn’t stop expecting to see a road sign soon. After 10 minutes or so, we had to stop because we met a dead end. I saw the map again, and found we missed the lamp long time ago.

Likewise our time and energy might be useless if we stick to go on in the wrong direction. If we don’t recognise Jesus’ voice, if we don’t follow his path, all our efforts done in the name of Jesus could be meaningless or even dangerous.

[7]

Sisters and brothers,

This morning Jesus invites us to be a good sheep, promising that “I will be the good shepherd for you.” When we become a faithful sheep realising and responding his calling by breaking our shells continually, the faith confession of King David in Psalm 23, that is, “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing,” can be ours as well. Amen.