

Shepherd's Pie
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
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Psalm 23

Shepherd's Pie is a mystery. I have no clue what's in it – Supposedly, there is always meat of some kind; it could be ground beef, or leftover pot roast, or lamb (that's where we get the shepherd's name), and I am pretty sure mash potatoes are used as the main filling – After that, it's anyone's guess. Perhaps there are some peas, and some carrots, and then you just fill in the dots with whatever's left in your kitchen – put it all in the pot before it spoils: celery, beets, the onion on top of your refrigerator that is growing brothers and sisters, spare automobile parts, Skittles, even the kitchen sink if it's not attached. Stir it all together with a secret concoction of spices; add butter, lots of butter (at least I am pretty sure that's what Paula Deen would tell us to do); Cover with a mound of cheddar cheese, and bake in the oven on 400 degrees, and let the Holy Spirit get to work. No need to set a timer, you'll know when it's ready. Shepherd's Pie is a mystery.

Shepherd's Pie is also a certainty. Here's what I know about Shepherd's Pie. The finished product is pretty good. A pan-full provides infinite scoops – you could feed a family, an army, an entire village. Everyone has plenty to eat, their bellies swell with delight, and there are always leftovers. Shepherd's Pie is community in a crust. Shepherd's pie is a certainty.

Shepherd's Pie, this mysterious certainty, has its origins in Scotland and Ireland in the late eighteenth century. Creative, but frugal-minded housewives were searching for ways to stretch their household resources: last night's meat; a never-ending supply of potatoes; and a need to prevent food from being wasted – Presto, a tradition is born.

Spoiler alert – Shepherd's Pie is going to be used as a metaphor this morning, and I see that some of you are giving me a look that says, "Preacher, this is North Carolina, and we don't eat a lot of Shepherd's Pie around here." I was prepared for that. So I want to remind you that Shepherd's Pie helped spawn some of our other favorite foods: Some of you may eat Brunswick Stew – the Okra and Green beans can do wonders for squirrel and possum meat; Others of you like chili – isn't it amazing how beans and tomatoes can enhance whatever meat those cowboys muster up on the range? Some of you enjoy banana bread – the savior of soft brown bananas; and all of us know that Ketchup can transform even the mildest meatloaf. So friends, if Shepherd's Pie does not do the trick for you this morning, please feel free to substitute the culinary creation that best resonates with your taste buds.

This morning, the Lord is in Sardis' kitchen, and Chef YHWH is making Shepherd's Pie. We shall not want. No friends, we have all we need.

The Jewish Study Bible translates the first part of our beloved Psalm:

The Lord is my Shepherd. I lack nothing.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me to water in places of repose.
He renews my life; He guides me in right paths as befits His name.
Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for you are with me;
Your rod and Your staff – they comfort me.

Chef YHWH has come into our house. Our cooks and helpers are surprised. They scurry around. “We did not know that you were coming,” they say, half frantic, half relieved. God says, “Do not worry. You lack nothing – We have everything we need to make our meal – Our cupboard is not bare. Methinks we shall have Shepherd’s Pie.”

And all at once, YHWH gets to work. A widow stands in the kitchen. “Would you like to help?” YHWH asks. “I am not whole” she responds. “A part of me is missing, my grief, some days it makes me only feel a quarter or a half.” YHWH smiles. “Madam, you are more than enough when you live in my presence.” “Okay,” she says, and she dons an apron and begins to chop some carrots.

YHWH invites a few more souls to join in preparation – All of them feel broken in some way – A retiree, a veteran, a divorcee, a man with a checkered past, a woman who is shy, a teenager who feels invisible – “No, no, no,” YHWH says, “In this kitchen, each of you are children of God. And you are my cooks!”

Pretty soon this broken chorus begins to sound more whole – the kitchen hums with the chop, chop, chopping of knives hitting cutting boards, and the plop, plop, plopping of vegetables falling into bowls. And there is laughter in this place. Our kitchen is a symphony.

The prep-work is complete. A lush pile of vegetables, the full harvest of our green pastures, is poured into the crisp, clean, still waters of the pot.

“Set the caldron to a boil!” YHWH says.

In a few moments, the still waters become violent – the temperature is a little too high, and the soup begins to boil over – each splash hisses on the stove. A helper yells, “YHWH, YHWH, what have I done! I am scared, I need your help. I fear I’ve ruined our meal for sure!!!”

“No worries, friend!” says, YHWH, calming the pot, stirring the soupy mix with ease – its violent waters recede – they still simmer, but only slightly, like a tranquil lake rippled by a skipping stone. The soup chef smiles – “I like cooking with YHWH!!!”

The Vegetables are softened, the potatoes have become a creamy filling. “To the oven! Let’s bake this pie!” YHWH says. With care, the assembled cooks fill their mold, and place it in the sweltering heat of the oven. What will this mess of miscellaneous become?

A few minutes pass. The baker is a little bit on edge. She peers into the oven – “YHWH, YHWH come quickly,” she says, “I am afraid. I see a dark valley – our little river of cheese is burning up! What shall we do?”

“Fear not!” says YHWH, “I don’t know about you, but I like it when the cheesy top becomes chewy and gooey and even a little crunchy. Yes, a spot or two is burnt and blackened, but that just gives it character!!! The scars on our crust are just part of our story! Come away from that window, and join me for a moment.”

YHWH’s college of helpers sits around the table. “You know what I like best about Shepherd’s Pie, YHWH says. “Each time you make it, it’s a journey. We never know how it will turn out. We take our best parts, our spare parts, even parts we don’t imagine have any value, and we blend them together. All the while, it is incumbent upon the pie’s chef to react and respond to the ingredients – to let them

thrive when they are thriving, or to offer a gentle nudge when they need help – a dash of this, a drop of that, a stir here and there. But never does the chef abandon his or her post – instead they live with their creation.”

“Ding.”

YHWH is interrupted by the oven’s timer. “Our creation is ready,” YHWH says. YHWH pulls the massive pan out from the oven’s door and sets it on the counter for the college of cooks to observe. “You see that crust? That’s part of the secret! It wraps this miscellaneous mess in its arms, molding it, seasoning it, locking in its flavor and goodness.”

Like any good cook, YHWH, grabs a spoon to sample the first fruits of this creation. YHWH, blows a cooling breath upon the spoon, and gobbles down its contents. “MMM-MMMM-UHHHH,” YHWH says. “Delicious!!! Perfection!!! You never know what each batch will taste like, it’s always good, but I think this is the best batch I’ve ever made! That’s another thing I like about making Shepherd’s Pie – it is the satisfaction and the delight and the surprise found at the end of the journey!”

“But good friends, I have not told you my favorite part of Shepherd’s Pie! Each pie is served at Banquet!!! And you are invited!!!”

I spread a table before you in full view of your enemies
I anoint your head with oil
Your cup runneth over (and so will your bowl-full of Shepherd’s Pie)
Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue you all the days of your life
And you will dwell in my house, for many years long

YHWH gazes upon this college of helpers. “My friends, today, you have helped me make Shepherd’s Pie. And tonight, we will share it together in banquet. And what a party it will be!!!”

“But,” YHWH says, “I have not cooked Shepherd’s Pie to simply feed you. I have cooked Shepherd’s Pie to help show each one of you that you are my special creation.

Sometimes your life will simmer and boil over; sometimes your crust will be golden brown; sometimes you’ll bubble with love and goodness; sometimes you’ll smoke with anger; sometimes you’ll shake with fear. But I will be there to guide you, to mold you, to help shape you, to pick you up, to set you down, to give you space, to hold you tight.

And I will revel in you – I will take delight in the new possibilities you bring to creation. And I will share you with others at the banquet – For the banquet is simply the Smorgasbord of my beloved.

Sardis Baptist Church – Each one of you is a Shepherd’s Pie in-the-making. God is at work in you. Your possibilities, your potential, your full story are all still a divine mystery.

But this much is certain – However your batch turns out, God will take delight and revel in you. And God will bring you to a banquet, adding you to that growing table of dishes too good to pass up at the Potluck.

God's banquet table is plenty long. And the plates God gives us have plenty of room to serve up ample portions of one other. I don't know about you, but I think I'll jump in line. I sure hope you'll join me. Amen.