

**A Shepherd God for a Shepherding People**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church, and especially for Mary Allen Stillerman**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**May 7, 2017**  
**Psalm 23 and Acts 2:42-47**

This morning we will hear two lectionary texts that intersect perfectly with the special occasion of a parent/child dedication. The Psalmist reveals the true nature and character of our God: a good shepherd who offers us the intimacy of individual attention and protection, and at the same time, the full and holy hospitality of a communal banquet. And the writer of Acts reveals the ideal faith community: a people so inspired by the winds of Pentecost, and so filled with the Holy Spirit, that they spend their days praising God with glad and generous hearts, and investing into the wellbeing of one another. This morning, we meet a Shepherd God who calls us to be a Shepherding people.

**Psalm 23**

A Psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;\*

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.\*

He leads me in right paths\*  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,\*  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely\* goodness and mercy\* shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.\*

**Acts 2:42-47**

<sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

<sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds\* to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread

at home\* and ate their food with glad and generous\* hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

I'm afraid that my homily this morning is less a homily, and more a mish-mash of thoughts, or a rambling, stream of consciousness, but today, I feel like being a Daddy more than I do a pastor. My thoughts are of Mary Allen, and of Sardis, and of these two remarkable texts. And truth be told, I'm overwhelmed.

I close my eyes, and I see that Psalm of Life: "The Lord is My Shepherd." And yours, too. And Mary Allen's, too. And I wonder about those "right paths" God is leading her on – will she be given clear directions to help find those green pastures and still waters? And I wonder how God will provide the manna in her life?

I don't have to wonder very long. I reflect on the last several days of her young but remarkable life.

In the past 48 hours, Mary Allen has eaten Cheerios given to her by Lisa; she's played on blankets made for her by Janie and by June; At bath time she's been treated to an all-natural body wash and shampoo given to her by Krista, applied with a wash cloth given to her by William, and dried in a bath towel given to her by Mary Jane. Each night we dress her in cozy pajamas given to her by a dozen Sardis families; we wrap her in swaddling blankets given to her by Howell, and nestle her in a bed of stuffed animals given to her by people like Hilary and Marge and Betsy and Don. And as she snuggles with her fluffy friends, we read her books given to her by Susan and Danny and Kathryn and Jonathan and Marvin and Kathie and Rebecca and Ryan and Atticus. And sometimes she wakes up in the middle of the night, and we have to change her – And it's no big deal because we have diapers that more than three dozen of you have given us. And guess what, we even have receptacles to put the dirty ones in – Thanks, Tillie and Kristin!!!

And Mom and Dad are busy – we're on the go! But not to worry. Mary Allen rides in a car seat given to her by Lauren and Tim and Clark, wrapped in a climate-controlling cloth given to her by Tim and Magay, that's adorned with hanging toys given to her by Don and Ellen and Patti and Melissa. And that car seat will soon be replaced by a larger seat given to her by Mary. And when her Mom and Dad venture into a store, to no doubt use the countless gift cards (given to them by generous Sardis members) intended to purchase more food and more clothing and more baby supplies, they are comforted that the diaper bag Linda gave them is filled with diapers and wipes given to them by a dozen more Sardis friends. And on Sundays our family vehicle takes Mary Allen to church where she needs something extra special: attention. And she gets it from Janette and Chris and Elizabeth and Janet and Alcie and Madie Kate and Betty and Brandon and Michael and Abby and Hannah and Jeff and Krista and Mary Jane and Barbara and Lisa and Kathryn and Valerie and Summer and Maria Elena and Maria and Joey and Olivia and all the other worship care volunteers. And that doesn't even count the choir who will do it this summer? And who am I missing?!?

Do you see what I'm getting at, Sardis Baptist Church? Do you see where I'm going with this?

The Lord is my shepherd. And Mary Allen, you shall not want!!!

Because, Mary Allen, you belong to a Shepherd God who has placed you among a shepherding people called Sardis Baptist Church. They are His rod and His staff and they comfort you. They are the warm embrace of a loving, motherly God who uses Her gentle hands to nudge you from rocky paths into green pastures and still waters.

Mary Allen, God loves you. And this congregation loves you. And that love is bigger than you can imagine.

But here's the thing, precious daughter of mine. As big as that love is, it is also communal. It's big enough to be shared. And guess what, it is!!!

It's not a stretch to say that little Amaya, and Isabella before you, have been the recipients of that same generosity and love.

And when I look out into our congregation, I see six young women and men, ready to graduate high school, who have also been the recipients of the shepherding love and care of Sardis.

Over the past eighteen years, I wonder how many times "Miss-Elissa" has told them that she loved them; or how many times Magay's cobbler warmed their bellies after an especially hard Wednesday at school; or how many times they've done homework at Sardis Academy in a bright room that Jim and Howell and Danny work to keep well-lit and at the perfect temperature; or how many times they've been reminded of the majesty of God's creation in the labyrinth and garden tended by Mary Jane and Linda and Barbara; or how many times they've been inspired by the choir's anthem; or how many times they've sung *Halle Halle Halle* and received the peace of Christ?

Mary Allen, God has this unbelievable way of making each of us feel special, and loved, and empowered, and full of potential. And God's individual care and concern for each us – it's not diminished by being shared with others. It's actually enhanced. We're invited into a banquet where everyone is full, where everyone matters, where everyone is named rightly: Child of God.

Our cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord, forever!

One last point, Mary Allen.

The people of that earliest church, they were moved by the spirit. Something happened – we call it Pentecost – somehow, someday the Spirit fell fresh upon them in a new way. And somehow, someday, they stopped worrying so much about Caesar's world. Instead, they took time to notice the Shepherd God. That God filled them, and inspired them, and loved them, and called them to a table. And the table was enough. And in that enough-ness, the Kingdom of God came near. In that enough-ness, the Shepherd God was revealed to and through a shepherding people.

And Mary Allen, that is our hope. Each time we dedicate a child of God, we pray that we will be transformed and transported, moved through and space and time to join the spirit that lived and breathed in the earliest believers. They stopped clinging for power and for wealth and for privilege and for uniqueness. And they started paying attention to the Shepherd God, the providing God, the generous God, the God of enough-ness.

And day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home, and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all people.

The Lord is my shepherd!  
And Those in the earliest church did not want.  
And then they told the story.

The Lord is my shepherd!  
And, Mary Allen, the people of St. Leo's Church made sure your mother knew: "You shall not want!"

The Lord is my shepherd!  
And, Mary Allen, the people of Memorial Church made sure your father knew: "You shall not want!"

The Lord is my shepherd!  
And today, Mary Allen, the people of Sardis pledge to make sure you know, "You shall not want!"

The Lord is my shepherd!  
And one day, Mary Allen, once you've come to know this Shepherd God, you too will stand among a group of believers, and proclaim to the next little girl, "You shall not want!"

Mary Allen, you belong to the Shepherd God. And you have been entrusted to a shepherding people.  
And we promise you: "You shall not want!"

May it always be so! Amen.