

# The Shepherd & the Carpenter

Psalm 42; John 10:11-18

August 23, 2009

(Ordinary Time)

**As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so longs my soul for you, O God.  
My soul longs for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?**

Longing ... thirsting ... yearning for God ...

The old King James Version of 1611 says it this way: **As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul for thee, O God.**

Did you know that a *hart* is really a *deer*? That's what it is. It's one of those four-legged things that like to get into your garden! And it was a *hart* that nearly totaled your car last November. Oh, and when Santa Claus comes, he comes with his *hart*, with *lots* of *hart*, I guess you could say. Even one with a shiny red nose. It's what lures hunters into the woods, away from home and family, and

civilization in general, I think. Makes them want to sleep on the ground and wear Elmer Fudd hats, and eat wieners and beans from a *can* (the same week as Thanksgiving, mind you!) It's the *hart* that does this. Really. It is. A tug on the old *hart-strings*, I guess you could say.

But that's it. There it is. A *hart* is a *deer* and a *deer* is a *hart*. And you know, come to think of it, my mom used to sing a little song about it ... when she thought no one could hear her, of course. It was something about "Dear Heart, Come Home," I think. Which I *thought* I understood at the time, but now I'm not so sure.

And it was my *grandmother* who did this to me. Because she told me about the *matters of the hart* back in the *stone age*, when I was a little boy. And it took me a little while to "get the picture," (as I recall) if I ever did. So, when my Sunday school teacher hugged me one Sunday morning at church and said, "Well, Tommy Nolan, bless your little heart," I thought maybe she knew something I didn't -- that Bambi would be waiting in my backyard when I got home from church.

But that was a long time ago. And I thought I had finally worked out all of this animal business in my mind. But then a letter came to the church one day. This was when we lived in Huntington -- at Beverly Hills -- which was a few *years* ago. But I remember it as if it were just yesterday. It was a handwritten note. With blue ink, mind you. On elegant, flowery, springy stationery. And I opened it very carefully with a letter opener. I remember that clearly, because it was so elegant and so pretty, mind you, that I couldn't just tear into it the way a kid tears into a candy bar. So I opened the envelope, opened the letter on the elegant stationery with the flowers and the curly things and the hummingbirds or angels or whatever they were. And it smelled. It did. There's a better way to say that, isn't there? It had a scent -- a soft and lovely fragrance. Kind of like lilacs in spring -- as if you could smell the little flowers on the paper. And it was sweet like perfume ... "Oh my," I thought, "who might this be from?"

Well ... it was from a man named Dick. And his wife Martha. An older couple in the church who had defected a few months earlier. Moved away they did. Left West

Virginia -- they left "almost heaven" for ... well for somewhere else. And the letter said that they had gone back to the church they belonged to when they lived there before. Back in the seventies, I think. The church was the Spokane Valley United Methodist Church in Spokane, Washington -- which was not in our zip code. But they mentioned seeing some old familiar faces out there. Which is a good thing, you know, when you're so far from home. It makes you feel a *little* more at ease. And at the end of the letter they said, "Please convey our hello's and best wishes to the congregation. Our transition has gone well, but we miss the *herd* ..."

Ordinarily, of course, I'd just assume they were talking about Marshall -- the *Thundering Herd*. Because we were in Huntington, mind you, the home of the Herd. But, in the letter, they used that word "herd" in the same sentence, practically, as the word "congregation." We miss the "herd," they said. Ordinarily people in churches are referred to as members of the "flock." But *herds* ... well, buffalo travel in herds, you know ... and large farm animals ... and pigs come to think of it. Pigs travel in herds. Do you see the problem here? Maybe it's

something or maybe it's nothing.... Or maybe it was just their way of saying the church there in Huntington had a lot of *hart*.

Does that make sense?

It reminds me of something that happened not too long ago. A pastor -- a United Methodist, I'm sure -- was invited to join one of the local service clubs. And some of his church folks were members there, too. In fact, two of his people were in charge of the nametags that evening. And they thought they'd play a little joke on their pastor. So instead of writing his *name* on the tag, they put the words, **Hog Caller** there. And he didn't see it. Didn't even look at the thing. He just peeled off the back, slapped the tag on his suit jacket, and that was it. **Hog Caller**, it said -- in big red letters.

So when the president of the club introduced him a little later that evening, he stood at the microphone, read the poor preacher's name tag, and laughed. He said, "**The Reverend Hog Caller is here with us this evening.**" And everybody laughed. *Including* the pastor, mind you. And *then* he stepped up to the microphone, and he looked out

over the crowd sitting round their tables and said, "**You know, they usually call me a *Shepherd of the sheep*. But I suppose our members know themselves better than I do.**"

My grandmother taught me about the matters of the heart -- either way you spell it. She taught me that the heart -- not just the deer, mind you, but the heart -- is thirsty for water. A different kind of water. For the heart longs for living water -- the kind that flows from the heart of God. And she taught me that God is someone who loves all of his little ones -- every one of them. Big and tall, short and small, black and white, and rich and poor. Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Lutherans -- even sinners, she'd say. God loves us *all*. Really. He does. But that wasn't all. It was my grandma who taught me that God loves one and all, and that God loves me.

And her favorite image -- her favorite story, I think, in all the bible was the Shepherd. The Good Shepherd. The one who will not give up on even *one* of his sheep, but who will (instead) leave the "ninety and nine," she called them, there in the hills and search and search until he finds the one that was lost. The one that was hurt, or

caught in the briars. The one that just couldn't keep up or wandered away from the flock. The Good Shepherd doesn't abandon his sheep. But he looks here and there till he finds the one lost sheep. And when he finds it he gathers it up in his arms and brings it back to the flock.

That was her favorite story, her favorite picture in all the bible. And that's how she thought of Jesus. He is the *good shepherd* who cares for his sheep.

**He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.**

And that was her picture -- the *image* of Jesus she held in her heart and placed in mine by the way that she lived. Because *she* did the same thing. She loved *all* of her neighbors and family and friends -- and even the strangers who wandered in and out of our lives. But that wasn't all. She had a way of making *each* grandchild, *each* little one, think they were **the one**. That she loved them and cared for them like nobody else. As if *each one* was her favorite. *Each one* was special. *Each one* was the one. And in that

kind of shepherding love there is healing and comfort and peace. ✠

I have a feeling Sir William Osler, the famous physician, was a bit like my grandma. Because he was visiting a children's hospital in London, once, and something on one of the wards there caught his eye and tugged at his heart. The children who were patients on that ward were all gathered at one end of the room. Playing together. All of them, mind you. All but one. A tiny little girl named Susan was sitting on the edge of her bed at the other end of the room. And the child looked terribly sad and alone. And he noticed she was clutching a cheap little doll, as if that was the only thing -- the only friend -- she had in the world.

Dr. Osler saw the child. And he saw the hurt and the fear and the longing in her eyes. And he turned to one of the nurses and said, "Tell me about this wee little girl. Why is she not with the others?" And the nurse answered almost in a whisper and said, "Oh, that's Susan. We've tried so hard to get her to play with the other kids," she said. "No one ever comes to see her. Her mother died some time ago, and her father has been here just once -- when she first came to us. He brought her that doll. And

that's the last we've seen of him." And she said, "The children have a strange code. Visitors mean everything," she said. "And if you don't have any visitors, you're ignored. You're a nobody. It's as if you don't even exist."

And Dr. Osler looked at the nurse with a smile on his old, wise face and a glint in his eye. And he walked over to the little girl's bed and asked in a voice loud enough for the other children to hear, "Susan, may I sit down, please?"

And the little girl's eyes lit up and she nodded.

And Dr. Osler said, "I can't stay very long *this* visit, but I've wanted to see you so badly."

And for the next ten minutes or so he sat there talking with her. He even asked about her little doll's health. And he took out his stethoscope and listened to the little doll's chest.... When he finally left, he turned to the bright-eyed little girl and said with a loud voice, "You won't forget our secret, will you? And mind you, don't tell anyone." And when he reached the door he turned and looked back. And little Susan was now at the center of a very curious and admiring crowd of children.

Jesus said, which one of you, if you had a hundred sheep and found that one was missing would not go back and find it? Which one of you wouldn't search high and low? People put posters on telephone poles all over creation when a cat is missing. Or a dog. So which one of you wouldn't go search for a sheep?

And isn't that how it is with the One we call the Good Shepherd -- the One we call Lord? When even one of his little ones is lost and alone, or broken or wounded -- when even one of his sheep is trapped by loneliness, hurt, and despair he won't give up until he finds it. And when he finds it -- when he finds you -- he will gather you up in the arms of his love and hold you close to his heart.

**For the Lord is your Shepherd. You shall not be in want. He will lead you to restful waters and revive your drooping spirit. He will lead you along the right path, always true to his name. And even when you walk through the dark and troubling valleys of life, he will be with you.**

And the One who calls you his beloved will sustain and nourish you even when you feel you're under attack in

body or spirit. And he will anoint you with the healing balm of his presence and surround you always with his strong and tender grace.

**As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so longs my soul for you, O God.  
My soul longs for God,  
for the living God.**

That's what my grandmother taught me... She taught me about the matters of the heart -- the heart that longs for flowing streams, and the heart that longs for the restful, healing waters of God's presence and peace. And when I was a child, she placed in my heart through her words and deeds an image of Christ the Shepherd who cares for all and one.

And this morning, I'd like to leave you with a picture, an image of the One who calls you his beloved ...

So let me ask you to close your eyes and imagine ...  
(PAUSE).

**Imagine yourself walking down the main street  
of a country town, at about ten o'clock in the morning.**

**You pass a grocer's  
with local vegetables in the window.  
You pass by a baker's  
with fresh-baked bread in the window.  
You turn a corner to your right  
and walk past a garden with a low wall.**

**In the middle of the lawn,  
a man is standing with wire mesh in his hand.  
He is staring at a large wooden box.  
He wears a light grayish-brown jersey,  
has close-cropped hair and a beard.  
He looks up, catches your eye and says, "Hello."  
You return the greeting and,  
looking toward the house, you say,  
"Do you live here?"**

**He says no, he was just staying there last night.  
You ask him what he is doing.**

**He turns the big box around, saying,  
"Have you never seen one of these before?"**

**You recognize that it's a rabbit hutch.  
"Is it yours?" you ask.**

“No,” he says,  
 “it belongs to the little girl who lives here.  
 This morning her heart was breaking.  
 The wind blew the hutch over last night  
 and the rabbit escaped.  
 She’s found the rabbit  
 and now I’m mending the cage.”

“Are you keen on rabbits?” you ask.  
 “Not particularly,” he says.  
 “Are you keen on woodwork?” you ask.  
 “I used to be,” he replies.

[PAUSE]

There’s a silence, and you look at the man’s face...  
 He’s a little embarrassed.  
 You look at his eyes: not blue or green -- but brown eyes,  
 and though he’s embarrassed, his eyes are smiling.  
 There’s another silence.

[PAUSE]

“Are you Jesus?”  
 And he says, “Yes”.

And before you can help it, you ask,  
 “Then why,  
 with all the things that need sorted in the world,  
 are you mending a rabbit hutch?”  
 He nods in the direction of the house and says,  
 “In there is a little girl whose heart  
 was breaking this morning.  
 I asked her the one thing I could do to make her happy  
 and she said,  
 ‘Would you mend my rabbit’s hutch, Jesus?’  
 And who am I to refuse a child?”

Then he turns to you  
 and says, “What’s the one thing I can do to make you  
 happy?”

And you tell him.  
 Now . . . you tell him.

[PAUSE]

And now that you’ve told him,  
 you trust him.  
 And you leave him to get on mending the rabbit hutch  
 for the wee little girl,

knowing that when the time is right,  
and even before it's right,  
he'll attend to you.

For the Lord is your Shepherd and you are his sheep,  
his beloved ... You are one of his little ones. And it is not  
the will of your Lord and Savior that even one of his little  
ones should perish.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA  
BENEDI, OBLISB

