



SUNDAY SERMON

The Lord is my Shepherd

The Gospel according to John, chapter 10, verses 1 to 10.

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

DATE

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Sun., May 7, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

READINGS

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

Life can turn in a flash.

Here is a poem titled "Choice" by Jo McDougall ~

You've come to the oncologist's office
to talk about your options.

You view the scans,
forgetting to breathe.

"It's metastasized." He frowns,
pointing to where and where.

He ticks off the preferred treatment,
the side effects,
low rates of success.

"It's your choice," he says,
closing your folder,
"but we need to start tomorrow."

You think of yesterday
when you lived in a different universe,
of a waitress,
hand on her hip, asking,
"Hon, you want mustard or mayo
on that sandwich?"

So fast. To whom do we turn when the tables turn? In whom do we trust?

So, we, like sheep. We've got all these sheep in the Gospels, living – like sheep – one day to the next, traipsing along, keen for the next green tuft of sod, a bite of lunch. To graze content with the others, or butt them out of the way, or get stuck in a thicket. Life with the flock. Then stuff happens. Sheep stray, get lost. Do dumb, sheep-like things that hurt the others, and feel bad about it. Thieves break in. Wolves menace. Stuff happens. Maybe that's the whole game; you move from one tuft to the next, til the wolf comes.

But Jesus says that is not so. Jesus says, I love you. I'm the gate, and the gatekeeper, too. I'm the shepherd, the good shepherd, the real deal. Not just to protect you. To give you life: I have come that you may have life, in abundance.

Continued

Some of the sheep, they've met Jesus, they know Jesus, they know Jesus' voice. And when bad things happen to them, what's the first thing they do? The first thing I've seen many others do when the tables turn. They recite the twenty-third psalm. Cuz' sheep... they know that psalm; deep in their hearts, they know.

The Lord, the Lord is my shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside cool, still waters. He revives my soul and guides me back onto the right path. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I am not afraid.

And the voice of the psalmist turns here, no longer describing, invoking – now speaking directly, as if side by side: You are with me; your rod and guiding staff, they comfort me. You spread a feast before me, you anoint me with oil of blessing, of love; my cup runs over. Your goodness and your mercy – the text says shall follow, but the word is pursue; your goodness and your mercy is pursuing me, after me, all the days of my life. And I will live in your presence, your house, for ever.

Many times I've been with someone in that dark valley when these words brought blessing and balm, changed the landscape and horizon altogether. Even though the field grows barren, the lamb lost, the mountain lion roars, or the choice is hard, life is different when we remember, and breathe, and know ourselves to be in the presence of the giver of life, in the company of the one who whispers our name – you are my beloved.

After my year of study in Kyoto, my sensei – my Zen master, gave me a piece of calligraphy he had written, a koan. It says, "the dragon and the mouse are the same." The dragon is one who is enlightened. The mouse is one who seeks day after day for enlightenment. They are the same. It means we think we need something other than what is, but when we see clearly, we will know we have been enlightened – saved, loved by God – all along. Your goodness and mercy is pursuing me all the days of my life.

Vaclav Havel says it this way in his writing about hope. Hope is "an orientation of the spirit," "a dimension of the soul." "Hope is not dependent upon some estimate of the situation." "It is not the same as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." So, "It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live."

So if Jesus has come that we may have life, and may have life in abundance, if we do not yet feel that we are living in that abundance, is there something we can do, you and I? It is one thing to affirm it, to yearn for it, to speak it with our lips. It is another thing to feel it and live with hearts of abundance.

I don't imagine we can do much to prompt or provoke the generosity of God. God comes by that naturally. But I do think we can practice things in our lives that ready us to receive, practices that prepare our hearts, if you will. I offer three things for each of us to do – straightforward enough we can each do all three this very week.

One, memorize the twenty-third psalm. It's only six verses, you may already have some of them down, and the cadence alone will carry you home. Memorize it because you just never know when you may need those words on your lips – in the company of someone else, or in a dark night of your own life. So, as for countless sheep before us, the remembered promise of God's abiding presence may well up from deep within us.

Two, find twenty minutes, more if you have them, go outside, and pay attention. Notice the fullness of creation, spring blossoming right in front of you. Take a walk or sit quietly in a yard, by a tree, in a garden. With a child, or a friend, or alone. Notice the buds, the leaves; sneeze; notice the bugs, the birds – the verdant streams, the banquet set, the cup spilling over. If we doubt for a moment that we are given life abundant, all we need do is notice life bursting 'round about us.

Three, spend a little time with someone whose need is greater than your own – someone who is sick, or sad, or lonely, or afraid. Be with them in whatever they are going through. Whatever lack you may be experiencing will turn to abundance. Even though you are the one who offers comfort, in truth, you will be the one who receives. Your heart will open and be filled. Jesus will meet you there, in that encounter. As you offer love, Jesus gives you love.

Memorize the twenty-third psalm, notice the world around you, and spend a little time with someone whose need is greater than your own – these three. Then let your heart rejoice and be glad. Then, tell someone about it. Tell someone about unexpected abundance in your life. Tell someone about hope. Tell someone about how Jesus is giving you life abundant. Praise God.

I close with a prayer that a parishioner (Judith Kozlowski), one of you, gave me a few weeks ago – written by your daughter long ago when she was eight years old. It's got a drawing of a smiling angel on the side here. The theology is complete – containing both petition and thanksgiving that her need is already being met ~

Dear God,

Thank you for being so good.

Why are some people so mean?

Please protect me from mean people.

Thanks, I knew you would.

Amen.