

Like a Shepherd

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Psalm 23

I am mindful that the COVID pandemic is far from over, and that, in fact, many in our congregation are living with a positive test right now. We say hello to them on the livestream this morning, with our prayers for mild symptoms and a quick bounce back.

Given the news this week, several of you have asked me where the Presbyterian Church stands on the issue of abortion. Let me take a moment now for a summary. If you'd like to discuss this more, or, perhaps, gather a group together for discussion, please let me know.

In point of fact, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), our denomination, and its predecessor denominations, has been fairly consistent on this matter since the early 1970's. We said then – and by “we,” I mean the General Assembly, our largest deliberative and legislative body – that “the artificial or induced termination of a pregnancy is a matter of careful ethical decision of the patient...and therefore should not be restricted by law.”

In 2006, we said that “when an individual woman faces the decision whether to terminate a pregnancy, the issue is intensely personal, and may manifest itself in ways that do not reflect public rhetoric, or do not fit neatly into medical, legal or policy guidelines. Humans are empowered by the spirit prayerfully to make moral choices, including the choice to continue or end a pregnancy. Human choices should not be made in a moral vacuum, but must be based on Scripture, faith and Christian ethics. For any choice, we are accountable to God; however, even when we err, God offers to forgive us.”

I have put copies of a summary of our policy statements on the table just outside the sanctuary door here. As I spent time this week with all of this, along with the consistent theme of prayerful choice, and the complexity of the discourse, were

other themes – the role of the church in facing difficult moral decision, the value of children and nurturing, protecting and advocating their well-being, seeking an atmosphere of open debate and mutual respect.

Again, these are policy statements; we don't have anything like canon law. At the same time, these statements have a consistency to them over time, and represent more than 50 year of consensus teachings.

I miss my mom every day. She was not perfect, by any means. The older I get and the more I reflect, I understand that, while at the same time have embraced a deeper appreciation of all that she was. On this day, I don't mean to romanticize or valorize or sentimentalize motherhood, or even my mom, for that matter. But I miss my mom every day.

She was born very prematurely in a coal-mining town in West Virginia, in a time when survival wasn't guaranteed. She was in the first generation of her family to graduate from college. She was a great teacher, and later, a great guidance counselor and school administrator. The families she served loved her, and the teachers she worked with adored her. She was a person of deep faith, an elder in her church. She had a certain tenacity that manifested itself in many ways. When we were old enough, and her teaching license had lapsed, she went back to school and not only was recertified, but earned a master's degree and then a Ph.D., doing work on women's experiences in educational administration. She ran many of her church's mission efforts, including an annual backpack drive for kids that included 100 toothbrushes that she hunted down – hunted is the right term – from local dentists. When she died, she was reading a book on Calvin, always the learner.

Her death was very, very unexpected, nine years ago this past week, and we are all still kind of reeling from it. I miss her, as I said, every day. She was a good wife, a good mother, a good grandmother – adoring her grandkids, a loyal friend, a dedicated teacher, a faithful Presbyterian elder, a Buckeye fan, a coal miner's daughter.

As I said, I don't mean to romanticize or valorize or sentimentalize motherhood. For some, this can be a complicated day, or more. I am mindful that for many here, and elsewhere, that memories are not cherished, and experiences difficult.

And I am mindful that for some here, and elsewhere, the quest for motherhood, magnified by cultural expectation, has been elusive. We are a community of faith, of *faith*, and we stand in solidarity with all those who struggle on a day like today, even as we remember, and give thanks, and say “Happy Mother’s Day.” Thank you for allowing me the privilege of sharing a bit. There may be a point, and if there is not, I thank you even more.

I learned this week that who are experiencing memory loss, dementia, Alzheimer’s, retrieve images of their mothers from their deeper memories when they are feeling especially anxious, or uncertain. When circumstances change, or a setting is unfamiliar, or memory fades just a bit, they think of their moms. For comfort, and safety, and security. For love, and care, and protection. Perhaps you do that even now, even before memory fades.

When I came here, I needed to find a dry cleaner. After a little searching, I did. I noticed on the receipt a few lines of text, a quotation. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

I remember leading a memorial service in Chicago; a staff member, John, who had worked on our building staff for several decades. His family asked if we would hold his service in our chapel. I got up at the appointed time and started reading these words: “The Lord is my shepherd...” Before I got to any of the rest the entire congregation was reciting, from memory, the entire psalm, as we have done a moment ago, my voice swallowed up in a wave of voices, mournful and grateful and hopeful.

What is it about those words, that image?

Scott Hoezee writes that “Psalm 23 is mostly all about a shepherd and sheep, and very few of us have ever even met a shepherd. Psalm 23 doesn’t seem to have any natural connection to us in the modern world. And yet the popularity of Psalm 23 persists.”

Why?

Theologian Joseph Sittler asked if there was “anything new in Psalm 23?”¹ Are the words of Psalm 23 so familiar that we sometimes gloss over them, presuming we know what they say without taking the opportunity to dig deeper. But we also know that these iconic words are iconic for a reason. They touch something deep within the human experience and also say something deeply profound about God.

Let’s take another look. What do we discover?

- God is our shepherd, first of all, and the insistence that we will lack for nothing, another promise of abundance in a world of perceived scarcity.
- Then we move from talking *about* God to talking *to* God, and a move from God’s provision to God’s protection, even in the face of death. “I will fear no evil.”
- Then a new move, a beautiful banquet table, and even as the reality of enemies is acknowledged, the promise of blessing.
- Then these words – “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The promise of home.

We are not sheep, and the image of sheep and shepherd may not be directly familiar to most twenty-first century readers; *it is* accessible enough to provide connecting points. We are invited to take it seriously as a significant way that the psalmist seeks to describe the divine-human relationship.

Much has been written over time about the relative intelligence, or lack thereof, of sheep. Since most of us are not shepherds, or sheep farmers, that discussion remains unfamiliar. Even so, we relate strongly to the shepherd metaphor as caregiver and provider. We need guidance and care, whether we are able to admit it or not. We need direction to the things that nourish and sustain. We need to be led beside the still waters.

Hoezee continues: “The world and our culture have changed much since that era when Psalm 23 was composed thousands of years ago. But we still like it. We like

¹ “Anything New in Psalm 23?” Joseph A. Sittler, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, Philadelphia:

Fortress, 1981, page 29.

it because we need it. Everybody needs a shepherd. Now we've got enemies and we are altogether too acquainted with that final enemy named death. Now more than ever we need a shepherd to guide us through death's chill shadow in this dangerous world. Life is not easy. It's not all still waters and green grass. We wish it were and we pine for the day when maybe that will describe our every waking moment. But until that day comes, we can know and celebrate again and again that the Lord is our shepherd. With this great and good shepherd of the sheep with us, we lack nothing because in his presence we already have everything."

That's why this still matters, and resonates. We all need shepherds. (We all need mothers as well, I would propose, or better yet, mother figures, step mothers, foster mothers, whether the ones who gave birth to us, or adopted us, or took on the nurturing, protective roles that matter so much.)

We all need shepherds. For us, that is articulated all over the place on this fourth Sunday of Easter. In the book of Revelation, we hear that Jesus, the lamb, will be our shepherd, wiping every tear from our eyes. In John's gospel, Jesus tells his inquisitors that his sheep hear his voice, and follow. For Jesus, writes Chelsey Harmon, "belonging to the good shepherd Jesus is central." But there is more to it than that, she says. "...the sheep do not belong simply because they exist; their belonging is an *active* belonging: hearing, following, being known (i.e., having experiences of Jesus), and being given eternal life." So whether sheep are smart or not so much, this is an active belonging, an active following. That following will not always be perfect; sometimes it will not even be so good. Sometimes we will go astray, get lost. At that point, the shepherds finds us, picks us up, turns us around, sets on back on that path.

Harmon writes that the sheep and shepherd relationship is "cosmically all-encompassing, yet divinely intimate: sheep who hear their shepherd's voice. Sheep who are known and loved by their good shepherd. Sheep who trust that, come what may, they are never alone but are safely ensconced in God's hand."

Sometimes faith is portrayed in an escapist, pie in the sky, reality-avoidance thing. And maybe it is. But not here. The psalm does not say there will be no evil. It affirms that because of the shepherd, we will not fear evil. Frederick

Buechner writes: "The psalm does not pretend that evil and death do not exist. Terrible things happen, and they happen to good people as well as to bad people. Even the paths of righteousness lead through the valley of the shadow. Death lies ahead for all of us, saints and sinners alike, and for all the ones we love."

Kiki Barnes writes: "The Good Shepherd never promised earthly immortality. Just the abiding presence of one who is willing to endure the pain of death out of love for us."

Some of you will remember the TV show "The Rugrats," watching yourself or with your kids or grandkids. There was a song in the Rugrats movie – I sang a bit of it at my mom's funeral. "I want a mom that will last forever." I want a mom that will last forever. We don't get that. We get mother figures, if we are so blessed. We get shepherd figures, if we are so blessed. And absent that, we receive the promise of the good shepherd, who does all of the things that a good shepherd does, leads, guides, protects, knows, and more so. Who loves us. Loves us.

"The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days; O may thy house be mine abode, and all my work be praise! There would I find a settled rest while other go and come, no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home." Amen.