

Always and Everywhere

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

4th Sunday of Easter - April 25, 2021

Texts: Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil
For you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.
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 (or, forever).

1 John 3:16–24

John emphasizes the physical nature of the resurrection. Our love, too, must take tangible form.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

John 10:11-18

This beautiful chapter recalls the beloved Psalm 23. John the gospel writer positions Jesus' words about the shepherd and the sheep between two miracles: the healing of a man born blind, and raising Lazarus from death. Notice that neither of them could see him; yet they could hear his voice.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon. Well, not exactly. Actually, it's been more of a big news sort of week. You know me well enough to figure that the big glaring headlines didn't escape me. I just hope that I don't get so obsessed with listening to the news that I forget to listen to Jesus. Or talk so much about headlines I leave out the Bible.

It's funny, but we can also hear the same thing so often we *don't* hear it anymore, or see the same thing so often it becomes invisible. Every time I go downtown, I drive past Northgate Mall. That means I drive past Planned Parenthood. And *that* means I drive past picketers. People are there with signs so often that I don't see them anymore. The one thing I've never done is stop to engage with them, to listen, to say, "Tell me about you. I want to understand." Not to argue, not to agree, but just to listen. Am I so sure I know what I'd hear that I don't bother to ask?

Sometimes, too, I just have to turn off the news and shut out the headlines. Usually it's when something in my own life is screaming for attention. Let me tell you about my personal headlines this week. I'll start by assuring you that *everyone is just fine now, everyone is home. Repeat, everyone is fine.* But remember last week how Anna Kendig asked us for examples of something mundane that turned out to surprise us? Last Saturday, Bob had news for me. If you haven't figured it out, Bob is my helpmeet, my live-in handyman, and also my honey. So on that ordinary Saturday morning a week ago, we got a little surprise. Bob was leaking precious bodily fluids. I won't say what the fluids were but I'll give you a hint: when bulls see this color they charge; when cars see it, they stop. We hope. So off to the ER, where they confirmed, "Yup, you're leaking, but we can't be sure about the etiology until the vascular situation abates. (Translation: we don't have a clue why you're leaking until you stop leaking so we can look inside.) In the meantime, can we offer you a week's vacation at Saint Marys spa?" Can you blame me if I didn't stop to chat with the picketers as I was driving to and from the hospital?

Now the second part of this little domestic drama is that Missy our Mystery dog is extremely sensitive to changes in her environment. Any shake-up tends to bring on...well, leakage, similar in color to Bob's but with a different etiology, cause unknown. We suspect it's emotional but all the vets and specialists have not yet figured it out or fixed it. So after spending a good piece of a day watching Bob leak, I came home to find more leakage everywhere and the Mystery dog asleep in her chair. As I was mopping the kitchen floor, I turned on the radio.

The time was just after 4 on Tuesday. And, yes, I heard The Verdict, along with about five billion other people. After the first rush of pure relief and a few deep breaths and some tears, I dipped my mop back in the bucket to finish the floor. And this thought came to me: today we've cleaned up some nasty leakage, but that doesn't mean we've fixed the problem. I wanted to get down on my knees on my wet kitchen floor and first thank God and then pray with all my heart that this moment is the beginning and not the end, and that change really is gonna come this time.

You know, more than anything this last week, I didn't want to talk about this; I didn't want you to have to hear one more sermon on race and maybe turn it off or tune it out. More than anything during

this last week, I wanted to talk about the change that's coming, and that's already all around us: about Earth Day and how the trees are bursting into life, and how I'll be eating asparagus from my garden this week and maybe rhubarb, and about how the seeds I planted in tiny pots in the basement are poking through the dirt: cucumber and kale, and oregano and nasturtiums. I wanted to talk about the birds going crazy for love outside my window every morning, and about Bob coming home from the hospital and mowing the green pasture that our lawn suddenly morphed into. Because even if these things don't make headlines, they're true, too, and good, and healthy and holy. We need to hear about the joys in life, not just the pain.

And we need to listen to the good shepherd. See, I really haven't forgotten we're in church, that we came here to worship, to share our joys and concerns, and to listen to the good news with at least as much attention as we listen to the bad news. We have to listen for the shepherd's voice, always remembering that the shepherd leads the sheep, and even though the sheep get lost sometimes, the shepherd never stops calling from up ahead of them. Strangely enough, that voice always stays the same, as clear and familiar as it was 3000 years ago, and yet it speaks to the headlines of the day, and tells us what we most need to hear.

So let's listen again to that voice speaking in our readings today. Listen to First John: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action ...as Jesus commanded, let us love one another." A command is not a wistful sort of wish list, but a must do. The command to love is not about feeling all soft and mushy inside; it's an order to act on the faith that God *is* love, always and everywhere. As one cardinal put it (the catholic kind, not the bird), "We are one planet, one human family, and as brothers and sisters we must look out for each other. I don't think a moral argument needs to be much more complicated than that."¹

One planet, one human family. Where else did we hear something like that? In the gospel, where Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Who are those other sheep, do you think? I've changed my mind on that one a few times, and I may change it again. But today I think it's the people I'm tempted to leave out when I say "one planet, one human family." I think it's the people I decided were on the wrong side of the fence, outside the range of righteousness. The lynch mobs. The oil and gas industrialists. The CEOs of multi-national corporations. Who is it for you? Who's missing from your heaven, or maybe just quietly set aside? There will always be issues, and people won't always agree. Sometimes we *need* to take sides. Sometimes we need to listen really carefully to the voice of the good shepherd and then speak the truth we hear, even the hard truths. There will always be headlines and horrors and change. Jesus asks, How are you gonna be with the change that's coming today? And then, he'll tell you how to change in words and ways you can understand, with integrity. Because "how you do anything is how you do everything." If you are

¹ From "Sightings," (ezine), Thursday, April 22. Cardinal Michael Czerny, who heads the section on migrants and refugees at the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

faithful in small things, you'll be faithful in big ones. How you treat your neighbor across the street is how you will treat your neighbor across the ocean.

Here's the clincher from Psalm 23: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." What picture comes to your mind? Do you see yourself sitting down to feast by yourself while everyone you've ever been mad at lurks in the shadows, stomachs growling? Can you visualize something better? Can you imagine sitting down to the banquet *alongside* those you called enemies, elbow to elbow at a feast of love? In this scenario, Navalny and Putin share a toast; over there, the Uigars and the Chinese leaders dig into one big bowl of rice; border patrol and Central American refugees help themselves from the same stack of tortillas, picketers bring muffins to the workers inside, while Democrats and Republicans break bread together in Washington. I know; it's hard to imagine. That doesn't mean it's impossible.

One flock, one shepherd. One planet, one family. Everything and everyone is connected, everywhere and always. Every action you take, no matter how small, sends a ripple through the rest of the world. This is about *not* numbing out, it's about *not* averting our eyes from what we're tired of seeing, *not* shutting our ears to what we don't want to hear, *not* assuming we know what someone will say before they say it, *not* just falling asleep because the whole mess is too darned exhausting. It's about where you listen, really listen, to the voice of Jesus in someone else, where you understand that your every movement, every moment, every thought can be a little seed planted for the future. Because even though things aren't perfect yet doesn't mean they can't get better. And even though one mess is mopped up doesn't mean everything's fixed. Bob's not leaking anymore but he still needs some medical tinkering to make sure he doesn't start again. And as for Missy the dog - well, some Mysteries are just never going to be solved in this lifetime. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

God of truth, we thank you today for the justice of this moment and a judgment according to your will. You have again inspired action that brought down the arrogant and called the powerful to account. May this give all people hope for our healing - together. Free us from our need for vengeance and clear the field to be ready for new seed. God our Savior.

Good shepherd, your voice calls pure and clear, beyond the headlines of the day to the hope of a future where all creation flourishes and all people thrive, where pandemics are conquered and all people live with care for all others. God our Savior,

We rejoice in the blossoming earth, in the many ways you feed us with bread and with beauty. Teach us to tend this goodness so generations still to come may know them, too.

We give thanks for healing granted to loved ones, and share the concern of those who still wait for health and stability to be restored and we pray for the deep desires of our hearts, for not only are you always speaking, but you also listen, and so we pray as Jesus taught us, "Our Father who art in heaven..."