

Psalm 23

Preached via Zoom for Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

April 25, 2021

## **My Shepherd**

A few days ago, I got one of those pop up memory notices on my phone that show you pictures you took “one year ago today.” It was a picture of me about 7 months pregnant with Eden. It was surprising to see because already I cannot remember what life was like before she came into our lives. She just turned 10 months old last week-our little pandemic baby.

As life begins to slowly open up, and as she continues to grow in awareness and ability, we are noticing even more what is new through her eyes and reactions. For example, I recently took her to the grocery store for the first time in her life, and the second we walked through the sliding glass door, she immediately gripped on to me for dear life. What seemed fairly normal to me was all new for her. The people, the sound of grocery cart being pushed, the music playing overhead, the sudden amount of visual overstimulation ... she was panicked. She did the thing where she was holding my neck tight and crawling up on me as if she could possibly get any closer to my body to protect her from the big bad ... grocery store. Our now 3 year old, Ezra, had been to the grocery store with me at least once a week since he was a few weeks old, so as he grew in awareness and ability, he knew the grocery store. The sights and sounds were not new to him ... they were familiar. But with our pandemic baby I am realizing that I will get a different perspective of what life really feels like and how overwhelming it may be because I will experience it through her. I was able to talk to her and reassure her that everything was okay and by the end of the shopping trip, she was even able to sit in the cart seat (while I leaned forward so she could still hold on to my arm).

You know, even if you and I would not panic or be overstimulated going into a grocery store, I do think we are all going to be responding differently and in ways perhaps we were not expecting as more and more folks get vaccinated and life gets back to a new normal. We will have to find those specific things that comfort us in the midst of this transition, things to cling on to, those things that we trust will help us and protect us and guide us. We might even be surprised at what those things are.

Our gospel lesson this week points to Jesus as the shepherd and the Old Testament lesson to the well-known and beloved Psalm 23. In this Eastertide, our lectionary now moves us from witnesses of the resurrection to who Jesus is and how we are to be. Our good shepherd to guide us in the midst of all of this (gesturing at

everything). And when we take a look at all of this (in case you weren't sure, I'm gesturing at the world), we see even more that we need a lot of guidance these days.

In my 13 years of ordained pastoral ministry, only once has anyone actually referred to ME as a shepherd on a regular basis. A friend of mine, her mom would always call me a shepherd and ask me about my flock. I never got used to that. It was startling to hear MYSELF referred to as a shepherd and the congregation as "my" flock, and that was the first time where I realized that this analogy feels very disjointed especially in reference to me. I remember hearing another pastor say that she also felt this disconnection the first time she was referred to as a shepherd and asked about her flock but she had the snippy and funny response, "Oh, my flock? They're fine-a little disobedient and a bit smelly." It just made me realize how little I know about what being a shepherd is actually about. You see, the truth is, I don't know anything about what a shepherd actually does or how sheep actually behave, so when we hear this passage about the good shepherd, yes, I want to trust this shepherd but I am not sure how to apply it to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Silicon Valley life.

Debie Thomas addresses the complexity by adding the fact that if we grew up in the church, we have been so accustomed to this imagery that we are not sure what to do with it. She writes that this imagery of Jesus as shepherd is "overfamiliar, its beauty buried under so much saccharine piety and greeting card sentiment...most of us have no real-life idea of what Jesus was talking about when he described the life of faith in terms of shepherds, sheep, hirelings and wolves."

But I am reminded that whenever Jesus used metaphor or imagery, it was very clear and relevant to his listeners, and although we in this day and age would not think of a shepherd as provocative imagery, we have to remember that referring to himself as a shepherd is also what riled up some of his listeners-part of what got Jesus arrested. So what was it about this metaphor made some able to relate to him better and find comfort and for others provoke them?

The context for this passage is Jesus is in the Temple during one of the Jewish festivals, and this imagery of sheep and shepherd tending their flock was ingrained in the imaginations of the Israelites throughout their history and scripture. Because of this, they associated God as the ultimate Shepherd over the flock, Israel.

So first of all, referring to himself as the good shepherd was him equating himself with God, while standing in the Temple. And not only that, by doing this, he was suggesting that God's presence does not merely dwell in that sacred place but outside of those walls, in the wilderness, out among the thieves, the wolves, and the smelly sheep...aka the outcasts, the non-religious, the unclean, the outsiders. He was saying that he was not there to protect and guide a particular type of sheep or

deserving sheep or sheep that had proved themselves worthy of his protection and guidance...but all sheep.

Which then led me to wonder a bit more about sheep. There was a video I saw this week that was making its rounds of a sheep that was stuck in a trench in the ground and a boy pulling it out. And he pulls and pulls and finally the sheep is free and bounds off and away...and as it makes several glorious leaps, the final one leads it right back into the ditch...and it gets stuck there again. It feels like such a great analogy of what it must be like to be a shepherd of sheep. ☺ But something I learned this week about sheep behavior, especially in relationship to a flock, is that sheep need other sheep to feel safe because it establishes a connection, relationship and bonding. And so, if a sheep becomes startled or threatened and is separated from its flock, it will flee back to its flock, often to the center. And what's kind of awesome is that those in the center will move out to the periphery to let those most vulnerable into the center. Sheep on the periphery are the ones who are most susceptible to predators and yet they will continue in this pattern for one another. Once the sheep in the center feel safe again, they will move out to make room for those feeling the most afraid or vulnerable.

I loved discovering this about sheep because it shows me this need for community and the necessary flexibility and pliability of the community to support one another. And so the work of protection and love is not only the duty of the shepherd, but it's also the work of the community together.

Friends, I don't know about you, but I am feeling tired of what I would call "preaching challenges." I'm tired of what feels like a stream of bad news, bad events, scary events that seem to keep coming. I'm tired in a pandemic time, which is hard enough, to try and figure out what to say about mass shootings, violence against people of color, racism, and unjust systems that are becoming more and more apparent to us. As a "shepherd" or one of your pastors, I want to be able to share great platitudes and show you how wise I am and help give us all meaning to the despair and give comfort in the midst of whatever chaos you are experiencing. I wish just my voice could bring you the reassurance you need that everything is going to be okay like I can with my 10-month-old daughter. But the truth is, even as one of your pastors, I'm a sheep too.

And so discovering this response of the sheep to protect one another, to center those most vulnerable or afraid and being willing to move in and out as needed ... that comforted me. I'm praying that learning this comforts you too. Because in this understanding – they're not always aware that even as they protect each other – there is a shepherd who is on the periphery of the periphery guiding them, protecting them, and guarding them with his life. And so following Jesus, allowing

ourselves to be guided by him, essentially also means looking out for one another, caring for one another, protecting each other, even as we are being protected. We are sheep and we make room for our realities and our truths. The hardest part might be acknowledging when we are vulnerable and sharing strength when we're strong.

Many of you know by now that Bob James, as of this recording, has entered into hospice care. For those of you who do not know Bob and Hazel, they have been members since 1950. Bob is 100 years old and has been one of the pillars of this community. But we rarely say the name Bob without the name Hazel. It's always Bob and Hazel. In one of my recent visits to them, Hazel told me that she's known Bob since she was 14 years old ... she's 97 now. And so walking into this new reality and unknown path comes with a lot of trepidation for her.

We spoke for a little bit and then I offered to read scripture and say a prayer. I read from the King James version of Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me...

And as I continued, Hazel's voice joined mine. Of course, she knew it all from memory, and as we read this psalm, I heard afresh and anew the journey of a shepherd that takes us through peaceful pastures and valleys of death to an abundant table and blessing.

Being in that room and hearing our voices connect and share breath and sound to recite one of the most well-known and comforting scriptures ... well, it was comforting. In our vulnerability and sharing in that moment, I felt the movement that put us both into the center and back out into the periphery of the flock, guided by our shepherd. It showed me the vastness of God's faithfulness through the generations and that no matter what threats, dangers, and toils may surround us, that we are being guided and protected along the way.

And so friends, if you're like me and needed a word of comfort today, may that be the message that comforts us. Let us listen to the voice of the One who is guiding us and holding us together, and then let us turn to one another and make room to expand and contract like breath to center those most vulnerable, to help them gain strength, and then move so that others may also find and experience the comfort they need in these days.

The Lord is my shepherd. Let us be the sheep of his pasture this day.  
Amen.