Springfield Presbyterian Church

April 30th, 2023

At the Sound of Your Voice

4th Sunday of Easter

1. Introduction

I promise that today’s theme of sheep and shepherd was not because next week is the Sheep and Wool Festival down the street, but the coincidence does make me laugh. I love the Sheep and Wool Festival because folks come from around the nation to share their sheep and their stories. As you step into the Howard County fairgrounds, you get to step back in time a little bit, and the scene of a shepherd and sheep doesn’t feel so far away.

 So today, we are invited into that landscape – one with green fields and wild blue streams with valleys and peaks and the voice of God who shelters, comforts, and guides God’s people. Alike me, you may also have been saying the first Scripture lesson in your mind by heart. I chose King James Version because while we often read out of the New Revised Standard Version, it seems that so many of us have learned this famed psalm in the King James Version. There’s something poetic and melodic about the ‘eths’ that are used and such vibrant imagery that you can’t help but to be grasped by it. For many, it brings up memories, some beautiful, and some hard – of weddings, of funerals, of sanctified moments, and sometimes simply the daily devotion. We have found the *Mona Lisa* of the Psalms this morning, so beloved and well-known, so how do we see this psalm with fresh eyes?

 It is interesting, because on the surface, since it is so familiar, we may have lost the sense of just how radical this scene is when we read anew. The first line, for instance, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” …that idea, in our culture, and in our lives, is aspirational. How many of us wander around this world without want or need? Do we feel the calm of the green fields and feel protected and sheltered? Somedays, yes, but not always. In my reading of the Psalm this time around, I sense that Psalm 23 is aspirational. We need to pray this psalm into reality, into being – because this is the life that God is offering us. This is abundant life, that even in danger and death, God is with us. This can be our reality, it can – it may feel far off, but as faithful stewards of the Word and disciples, we are called to keep on praying this into being as our daily reality, relentlessly, for ourselves and for all who come after us.

Yet, even in the most beautiful setting, this aspirational view, it is interesting that danger and enemies still reside. Good and evil continue to exist. So, to hear this psalm is to acknowledge that God is protecting us, but not removing danger from us. The sense of community is important here – the sheep protect one another and the shepherd protects them all. The psalmist even goes as far as saying that we will sit at the table before our enemies. Danger is not far off, it is right here – we are going to eat right in front of our enemies – that seems like a scary intimacy. We must acknowledge that danger, peril, and struggle are all real, even in this idyllic landscape, but it points even more towards the need to keep seeking God, our shepherd who protects, and staying close-knit to help one another. In this way, the psalm is not just a psalm for times of death or funerals, but this psalm reflects the contemporary daily life and the relationship we are called to have with God and our community.

1. The second reading

 The second reading today, from the Gospel of John, is lesser known than Psalm 23, but very much still embodies the shepherding theme. Yet, to be honest, it’s confusing – because we are unclear about the metaphor here and even the best scholars still lack a good interpretation. Jesus says he is the gate, but then we also know he’s the shepherd. This gets complicated when we think about gates, because gates usually keep people in or keep people out. It is confining, it has a country-club sensibility – who is in and who is out? That’s not the Jesus I know, and I could go down the rabbit hole, but I wonder if that’s more a distraction than helpful this morning. But we have to name it – the metaphor can keep us from the better message I think is at play here.

I think the greater message is the one that is also instilled in Psalm 23 – that in God, that in Jesus Christ, we are called to a life of abundance and the shepherd is the one who offers this abundance. What is abundance? Abundance can mean many things to different people – but abundance is protection, guidance, encouragement, food, shelter – it is both the tangible and intangible. If you look at the dictionary though – abundance simply means ‘a large amount of something.’ So what does life in abundance look like? It is ours to define to some extent, but we know that God wants to offer us this blessing as God’s beloved children.

The other piece of this lesson that is crucial and may be the most comforting word for me today - is this sense that God is calling us by name and we know God’s voice. When the Gospel was written, there were various people and institutions trying to lay claim as the best and the brightest and the ones that should be followed. Today, we have much of the same. So, this idea, which isn’t included explicitly in Psalm 23, but I think can be justified, is not only to encourage but really emphasize that the sheep must listen. Yes, the shepherd, God – has the big job at hand – making sure we are protected and gathered and sheltered and safe. But, that doesn’t mean that we, as sheep, are just called to wander around aimlessly enjoying the green fields and quiet streams. I mean, yes, that is part of the call – that is the goodness and abundance that God longs for us, but I want to point us also to the responsibility that we, as the sheep in this story, have in our lives today.

Sheep have this unfortunate image that portrays them as clumsy and goofy. My friends, it might sound funny, but studies have proved that sheep are actually really smart. Studies have shown that they can solve problems and they can find their way through a maze. They aren’t stupid, so please know that when we are using the metaphor here of sheep and shepherd – there is no implication here that we are clumsy, goofy, and not bright. So, don’t let the metaphor go sideways on you – give the sheep and yourself some credit.

V. Life

So, we need to get to the real tangible, how does this land in our world, sensibility, as we take these two texts and seek to put them to work in our lives.

We are called to listen to the shepherd’s voice and that voice is one of trust, of love, of kindness, of mercy, and of faithfulness. That voice is the one that rises above all chaos and turbulent words of others and becomes the resounding voice that leads us to abundant life. How do we listen? When every voice in the world is wanting to take hold, how do we continue to point to God?

We do this in many different ways. We remain committed to prayer and discernment, seeking the Spirit’s call on our hearts and our lives. We turn off the TV and our devices when they want to take centerstage and we come back to our roots and center ourselves. We actively choose acts that point to abundant life – by working for justice, by seeking mercy, and by being kind to one another. We listen to God’s voice by being here, together, in community and we remain close as a flock. We keep on asking each other, “are we listening?” and we retune and reform what we are doing. If it does not point to abundant life, to love, to joyful service – is it of God?

Yes, God is our protector and our Good Shepherd and that is a beautiful thing to rest in and take hope and comfort in. Yet let us not lose sight of the fact that we need to remain committed to seeking God’s voice in all we do, say, and act upon. As a faithful flock, may we continue to seek the voice that is always seeking us first. Amen.