

“At Home in God”

Psalm 23, Acts 2:42-47, John 10:1-10

Springdale Presbyterian Church

May 3, 2020

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;

2 he makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters;

3 he restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil; for thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life;

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Acts 2: 42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

John 10:1-10

"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.

Sermon

Whether you are a parent or a grandparent or one of those wonderful volunteer readers at your local preschool, you know what a blessing children's literature is.

Though not all is of the same quality, much of it is well-written and filled with simple, yet profound lessons for life. One of the *best of the best* children's books (in my humble opinion, of course) is Margaret Wise Brown's, *The Runaway Bunny*. It is a treasure for children of any age... and (I might add) contains some serious biblical theology as well. *The Runaway Bunny* is the story of a little bunny who dreams about running away from home... only to find that "home" (in the form of his mommy) is with him wherever he goes. When he becomes a bird and flies away, he lands in a tree the shape of his Mommy. When he becomes a boat and sails away, his Mommy takes the shape of the wind. When he joins the circus as an acrobat, his Mommy becomes a tightrope walker who walks across the air to him. Finally, the bunny realizes what's happening. "Aw, shucks!" he says, "I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny." And he does. The simple and profound message this morning is that whether we are bunnies or sheep or people, we cannot outrun God... because like that early ark of the Israelites, God travels with us wherever we go.¹

So absolutely convinced of this, the psalmist asks:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where *shall* I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"

even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is bright as the day,

for darkness is as light with you.²

This, of course, is the truth the Apostle Paul echoes when he writes: "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord... neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation."³ Friends, whether we are bunnies or sheep or people, we cannot outrun God... because God is our home.

Well, this Fourth Sunday of Easter... this Good Shepherd Sunday... offers us many wonderful images of God as our home. God is shepherd... God is host... God is green pasture and still water... God is mansion and fortress and open gate. And whichever image we use... whatever the circumstances of our lives... the message is the same: God is our home... and because of that, even our most difficult days can be infused with life that is abundant.⁴

¹ Susan Andrews in "At Home With God" in *Christian Century*, April 14, 1999, p. 413.

² Psalm 139 selected.

³ Romans 8:31-39.

⁴ Andrews again.

These past six years – no sorry, I mean these past six weeks – these past six weeks have been the most challenging and exciting and strange and blessed and stressful and busy of any weeks in my ministry career. For the “work Whit” ... for the “ministry Whit” ... it has been quite a stretch! But for the “person Whit”... and more specifically, the “spiritual person Whit” – this whole pandemic experience has really thrown me off kilter... it has given me a whole new set of things to worry about... very little makes sense right now... and I know I’m not alone in this. Jill Duffield nailed it for me in this week’s Presbyterian Outlook, “Nothing seems stable, and formerly routine tasks require thought and planning. The heretofore settled rhythms of life no longer apply. The word “unprecedented” keeps coming up. The unknowns refuse to relent. And as badly as I want to hear Jesus call my name and guide my steps, often I feel instead as if I am walking around in circles with no clear sense of where I am supposed to go.”⁵

Well, to try to relate all this to our Bible readings this morning, I think that one of the important things our present experience is teaching me is that there are actually TWO PARTS to God’s promise on this Good Shepherd Sunday. The first part is that I have a home in God... YOU have a home in God... that all God’s children have a home in God – so that spiritually speaking, my friends, we are never homeless!

But such an amazing grace... such a blessed assurance... requires something of us... even demands something of us... and this is the second part of the promise: God is our home... but God also wants to make a home in us... in me... in you... and we will only come to trust our dependable God when we take on a dependable discipline of faithful living... only when we surrender ourselves – heart, mind, soul, and strength – to Christ... only when we make enough room for Christ to come in take up residence in our lives... only then will we know the peace that passes all understanding...only then we will experience the life which is abundant.

Surely this is what our sisters and brothers in the earliest church were doing amidst the many challenges they faced? Luke tells us in Acts Chapter 2 (and in one very important verse – verse 42) ... Luke tells us that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. These were the marks of the earliest church... the basic practices of day-to-day life under very difficult circumstances... when they didn’t know what else to do... they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. So, too... when we are living through difficult times... when we don’t know what to do... we can begin with Acts 2:42... Scripture, fellowship, worship, food, and prayer. Learning God's Word together... worshiping with and supporting each other... eating together... praying for one another. And even if RIGHT NOW we can only practice these disciplines “virtually”... we can trust that the Spirit of the Risen Christ is not limited to the space inside this room... we can depend on the Spirit of the Risen Christ to show up and be present among us.

There’s a legend about an Ethiopian shepherd boy who was stranded one night on a freezing mountain, clothed only in a thin wrap. Having given him up for dead, the villagers were amazed when he arrived home the next day – very cold and hungry, but also very alive! And when they asked him how he survived he said, “The night was bitter. When all the sky was dark, I thought I would die.

⁵ Jill Duffield, Looking Into the Lectionary, Presbyterian Outlook, May 3, 2020

Then, far off I saw a shepherd's fire on another mountain. I kept my eyes on the red glow in the distance, and I dreamed of being warm. And that is how I had the strength to survive." Friends, Acts 2:42 offers us a playbook of sorts for how to keep our eyes on the red glow in the distance... these are practices that invite God to be at home in us... disciplines that make room for God to show up and make a home in us. So, let me ask you – now more than six weeks into this – are you engaged in some sort of Bible study or devotional practice that keeps you in Scripture? Are you making time for worship? Are you keeping in touch with the people who know you and love you and feed you? Are you reaching out to folks who need your touch? I'm not trying to make you feel guilty... as if you don't already have enough to worry about. In fact, it's just the opposite – I'm reminding you that God is home for us – that God has been... is now... and will always be wherever we are. And that by the power of Christ's Spirit, we will fully know that... we will know the peace which passes understanding and experience the life that is abundant – as we make room for him to be at home in us. While Heather and I grieve we can't be together this morning in this room... while we grieve that we can't gather around this table or all those plastic tables in the fellowship hall, I assure you that nothing will stop our worship, or our fellowship, or our prayers, or our communion with one another in the Spirit of Christ. How can I know that? Because I know that Easter could not be stopped... and the risen Christ will not remain in the graveyard or be prevented from coming to us by any stay-at-home orders.⁶ The Good Shepherd is on the loose... and he will stop at nothing to gather and protect and provide his sheep.

⁶ Duffield again.