



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: April 25, 2010

Attending to the Voice of the Shepherd, Robert B. Culp

John 10:22-30; Psalm 23

Contrary to what many people assume, the really great sentences in the Bible are not in the imperative mood (of law), but rather are in the indicative mood (of grace). This is not to say that the memorable “Thou shalt’s” and “Thou shalt not’s” of the Ten Commandments, as well as all the other powerful ethical imperatives of the Bible, are to be viewed as unimportant. Indeed, they are stunning and stirring, and they call us to shape our lives in ways that affirm human dignity and foster a community that is humane and orderly.

But the greatest sentences in holy scripture are in the indicative mood, and they are accented by a life-giving grace. I think of such sentences as these:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1 John 4:16)

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” (Ps 46:1)

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” (Ps 23:1)

These statements are all about God and God’s never-ceasing love for us. And if God’s love for us is the first and greatest thing we can say about Biblical faith, then the primary religious response on our part is gratitude, not duty. And as one commentator has noted, “duty calls when gratitude fails to prompt.” Which is to say that the great imperatives of our faith need to take second place within our religious journey. To be sure, they serve us well as helpful signposts of faith. But the indicatives are the true hitching posts. And the 23rd Psalm is one of the primary hitching posts we have within the faith we share.

I suspect that there is one, and only one, chapter of the Bible that most people in the English-speaking world know by heart. We may remember a number of stories about Adam and Eve, Noah, Joseph, Moses, David, Jesus, and Peter and Paul. We may be able to recite portions of the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and other passages that have entered

into our faith's vocabulary. But when it comes to an entire chapter from God's Holy Word, my guess is that the only one we may be able to recite from memory is the 23rd Psalm.

Even if you cannot recite the entire Psalm perfectly, you probably know it well enough to say it along with others, the same way many of us sing along with "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a ball game. And we are so familiar with the 23rd Psalm in the King James' Version that when a new translation of the Bible comes along every few years, using archaeological and linguistic evidence to help us better understand what the original languages are really saying, we are uncomfortable with the so-called improvements. We may welcome the rewording of the texts and stories, not missing all the thee's and thou's, the begats and wouldst's of Elizabethan language. But when it comes to our favorite passages, especially the 23rd Psalm, we crave familiarity far more than accuracy.

Somehow, in just a few lines, this Psalm conveys the distilled wisdom and theology of generations, offering us a way of seeing the world that renders it less frightening, teaching us to deal with the loss of people we love as well as conflicts with those who may not like us or who treat us badly. It shows us how to recognize the presence of God at times and in places where we might think God was absent, or when we might be so distracted by our own concerns that we might overlook God's presence. Indeed, this Psalm has the power to teach us to perceive and think differently and, as a result, to act differently.

Albert Einstein once remarked that science can tell us a great deal about the universe – how old it is, how vast it is, what laws of physics control it, how energy and matter are related. But he went on to say that science is utterly powerless to answer the most important question of all: namely, is the universe a "friendly place," supportive of human hopes and aspirations?

The 23rd Psalm, with its image of the Lord as our shepherd, responds to such a concern in a way that's touched the hearts and minds of God's people for many generations. It gives us an answer to Einstein's question, not in dense theological language, but in beautifully-crafted images and poetic words. And we respond to its honesty and hope as much as to the beauty and depth of its language.

One commentator writes: "It comforts us with its familiar words and images, but its message goes well beyond comfort. It does not simply offer us the prospect of a better, safer world beyond this one. It teaches us to look at the world we live in clearly and without illusions, but at the same time to see it as a world in which we can live courageously, doing good for ourselves and others."

Of course, our world is not a perfect world. It is filled with great uncertainties – from earthquakes, hurricanes, and volcanic eruptions to accidents and unexplainable human tragedies. Yet, it is God's world, and that makes all the difference. The world is dangerous, and

the Psalmist admits this. But we believe God is with us to minister to us, to help us, even as a shepherd cares for his sheep in a world of dangerous predators and threats of accident. The world may be a frightening place, but it becomes less frightening when we trust that God is by our sides. As one writer has put it, sometimes God calms the storm, but sometimes God lets the storm rage and instead calms the frightened soul.

The Psalm doesn't deny the shattering reality of death and loss, nor does it minimize how painful they can be for us. It never asks us to pretend, as some religious teachings do, that death does not change things, that moving from life to death is no different than moving from New York City to Los Angeles. It acknowledges the emotional darkness we find ourselves in when a loved one is dying or has died – “the valley of the shadow of death.” But instead of cursing a God who permits our loved ones to die, the Psalmist introduces us to a God who is with us in our pain, and who seeks to lead us through the dark valley back into the light. The Psalmist summons us to live bravely and nobly, not only to go forward with our lives in the confidence that we are not alone, but also to do so gratefully, and content with who we are and what we have.

Writing about the 23rd Psalm, Rabbi Harold Kushner says: “If we are anxious, the Psalm gives us courage and we overcome our fears. If we are grieving, it offers comfort and we find our way through the valley of the shadow. If our lives are embittered by unpleasant people, it teaches us how to deal with them. If the world threatens to wear us down, the Psalm guides us to replenish our souls. If we are obsessed with what we lack, it teaches us gratitude for what we have. And most of all, if we feel alone and adrift in a friendless world, it offers us the priceless reassurance that ‘Thou art with me.’”

It was such a message that Jesus embodied and shared in the ministry that was his along the dusty paths of Galilee. He understood himself as the Good Shepherd, the one called to lead the sheep of his flock along pathways that lead to life in abundance, that lead to justice for the oppressed and forgotten, that lead to healing and mercy to those broken and lost. “Only hear my voice,” Jesus counseled. “And follow me.”

But just as some listeners in Jesus' day struggled to hear his voice and to believe his message, we, too, struggle to hear and believe the words of this itinerant rabbi ... especially in an age where there are few shepherds and even fewer who wish to see themselves (ourselves) as sheep. Amidst the cacophony of so many voices that vie for our attention, we make our way here to the church's sanctuary as regularly as we can, and we strive to believe. We believe valiantly on some days, but pitifully on others; with enough faith to move mountains on some occasions, but not enough to get out of bed on others.

Barbara Brown Taylor observes that “Since we believe in what we cannot know for sure, our belief tends to have a certain lightness to it, an openness to ambiguity and a willingness not to be sure about everything. Our belief” she says, “is less like certainty than like trust or hope.

For we are betting our lives on something we cannot prove, and it is hard to be very smug about that. Most of the time the best we can do is to live ‘as if’ it were all true ... and when we do, it all becomes truer somehow.” She notes that “Some days we are as firm in our faith as apostles, and some days we are like lost sheep, which means we belong to the flock not because we are certain of God, but because God is certain of us, and no one is able to snatch us out of God’s hand.”

A friend of mine named George, who is a pastor in Alaska, used to work as a shepherd in Maryland, and he would bring to the church about six sheep every summer during Vacation Bible School ... not only to show the children how he sheared sheep and to let the children get close enough to touch them, but also to talk about how the sheep respond to his presence as their shepherd. I remember his telling us that in contrast to cows that need to be pushed from behind in order to get them to move forward, the only way sheep will move forward is when the shepherd gets out in front of the sheep ... because they will not go anywhere that someone else doesn’t go first to show them that everything is all right.

George also told us that sheep tend to grow fond of their shepherds, allowing them to walk straight through a sleeping flock without disturbing them at all. But if a stranger tried to do the same thing, the sheep would start running in all different directions. He observed that the sheep in his care seemed to feel as if he were a part of their family, with his role being the need to distinguish the bleat of pain from one of pleasure, and the sheep’s role being to learn that a cluck of the tongue meant food, and a two-tone whistle meant it was time to head home.

Someone has observed that in Israel today, it’s still possible to witness a scene similar to the one Jesus probably witnessed 2,000 years ago ... that of Bedouin shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various pastures on which they have been grazing through the day. Often those flocks wind up at the same stream near the end of the day, half a dozen flocks all mingling together into, as it were, a convention of thirsty sheep. The shepherds, though, don’t worry about this, because when it’s time to go home, each one issues his or her distinctive call: a unique whistle, or the sound of a certain reed pipe, or a special trill sounded forth. And those sheep that belong to that particular shepherd all withdraw from the crowd in order to follow their shepherd home.

The sheep know to whom they belong, for they know the shepherd’s voice and the shepherd’s ways ... and that shepherd is the only one they will follow.

But as for you and me, well, sometimes we have trouble (don’t we?) as we try to listen for that special sound and hear the voice of the One who “is certain of us.” Therefore, we need to be patient with ourselves. Because some days, God’s voice may sound like a whistle to us, and some days like a cluck; some days it may come to us softly, sounding like a love song, and other days it may sound strident and harsh, almost like a curse; some days it may sound like an

insistent whispering upon our hearts haunting us in a gracious fashion, and on other occasions it may almost knock us down, and feel like a slap on the face or a kick in the behind.

For you see, it's not a voice that always speaks to us in words, much less complete sentences. But it can usually be heard between our getting up and our lying down each day ... and if we attend to this voice, the promise is that it will lead us beside the still waters, and restore our soul, and will accompany us through even the darkness of the valleys of life.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, help us to hear your voice amidst all the other voices that come to us every day ... that hearing, we may follow you into the goodness and fullness of life itself and dwell in your house forever; through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.