

WGUMC April 22, 2018 "The Shepherd of Creation"  
Psalm 23; John 10:11-16; I John 3:16-18

My dog loves to eat grass especially at this time of year. I call her my little black sheep. I guess that makes me her shepherd. She goes with me on my runs, which means that two or three times a week, I am taking her to green pastures and leading her beside still waters. I can't speak for her, but for me just being out there in the beauty of God's Creation always restores my soul.

It's a happy coincidence that on Earth Day, a day that we remind ourselves that we are stewards and shepherds of God's Creation, the lectionary gives us two readings about the Good Shepherd. In the background of both of them is a parable from the Prophet Ezekiel about bad shepherds. Ezekiel railed against the kings and priests of his day, the so-called shepherds of Israel, who were so hungry for power that they were feeding themselves on the sheep. Kind of like the bad shepherds we have today.

Bad shepherds rule by fear, not by love. They divide and scatter the sheep instead of gathering and protecting them. And

whenever real danger comes close, they run far away. Ezekiel warns them that God has noticed and will do away with those bad shepherds.

Psalm 23 holds the good news that God won't send us a hired hand. God will come down and be our shepherd. I wish we wouldn't reserve Psalm 23 for funerals, because it wasn't written for those who have died but for those who are struggling to live. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." I thought, sounds nice, but how does that work for the men and women living in tents under the 87 overpass who snarfed up the burritos and coffee we handed out yesterday morning? I can think of a lot of things they need.

But in the midst of their deep poverty, many of them would tell me that they are loved and blessed by God. And they seem to know better than most of us do that only God can satisfy our hunger. Only in God do we feel safe and find rest. Since you probably don't live outdoors in a tent, you just might have to get out into some green

pasture somewhere or sit yourself down beside some still water before you remember that only God can restore your soul.

Now that the weather is warmer, it's time for me to arrange a field trip to restore some souls. I promised to take the Village House women to Henry Cowell because I knew that it would be good for their souls. And I just have to thank God that there were some folks a hundred years ago who read their Bibles and knew that God didn't put those redwoods there just so we could come and chop them down. Genesis tells us that God put Adam in the Garden of Eden to keep it not to destroy it. [Genesis 2:15]

We long ago left Eden and for most of human history, we have been waging war against other living things. When we get to the New Testament, we have Paul saying that "the whole creation has been groaning" because of our sin. And now the Creation is waiting with eager longing to be set free from that bondage. [Rom 8:19-23]

Tomorrow Hank and I are going to Martinez to see the home of someone who heard the Creation crying out and dedicated the rest

of his life to setting it free. John Muir knew his Bible backwards and forwards because his Scottish Presbyterian father beat it into him. Fortunately for us, he broke free of that deadly faith and found a living connection to God in his first summer in the Sierras.

After walking from Wisconsin to Ontario and from Ontario to Florida, he got off a boat in San Francisco and walked to the Sierra foothills. There he took a job as a shepherd and led 1800 sheep into Yosemite Valley for summer pasture. Here is what he writes in June, 1869:

Now we are fairly into the mountains, and they are into us. We are fairly living now. What bright seething white-fire enthusiasm is bred in us—without our help or knowledge...

How glorious a conversion, so complete and wholesome is it, scarce memory of old bondage days is left...Nature like a fluid seems to drench and steep us throughout, as the whole sky and the rocks and flowers are drenched with spiritual life—with God. Now I am not longer a shepherd with a few bruised beans and crackers in my stomach and wrapped in a woolen blanket, but a free bit of everything, not to be defined as to extent nor cramped or bound as to movements more than clouds are...Yet will I drift about these mountains, movements of Divine love, near or far, here or there, willing—dearly loving to be but a servant of servants in this holy wilderness.”  
[quoted in John Muir, *Spiritual Writings*, pp. 54-55]

John Muir was living the truth of Psalm 23. But even Muir would say that our restoration requires more than green pastures and still waters. To restore our souls, we also need righteousness. That's Bible-speak for justice. When it comes to Creation care, if our rulers are not very righteous, if our leaders frequently do not tell the truth, at least we can thank them for reminding us that only the Good Shepherd can lead us down the right path. He's the one who says, "Consider the lilies" and "look at the birds" and see how your Father, your Mother, cares for them. [Matthew 6] Shouldn't we care for them, too?

But some will say that it's too late already. After all, the trees we cut down can't be uncut. The fossil fuels we have burned can't be unburned. The poison we have poured into the sky and the sea can't be unpoured. The damage has been done.

While that is true, here is another truth. This one comes from Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

We know that: Pain cannot be unmade, That Life cannot be un-lived, That Time will not run backward and that We cannot un-

choose our Choices. But God has promised that: Pain can be healed, Our Choices can be redeemed, Our Lives are blessed and that Love can bring us home. May you walk with the knowledge that God covers you with forgiving Love and brings you home. [from *Made for Goodness*]

Tutu's words are true because the Lord is our Good Shepherd. The only question is: are we good sheep? He calls us by name. Do we hear his voice? He leads us out. Are we willing to follow? Or do we wander away and become wolves' prey?

If we want to survive, we'd better stick with the Shepherd. He is so good because he lays down his life for the sheep. Like Aaron Feis, the football coach at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School who threw himself in front of a barrage of bullets to shield his students. Aaron gave his life for his sheep.

Another good shepherd is Tammie Jo Shults, the Navy fighter pilot who was flying for Southwest Airlines and approaching cruising altitude when one of the engines of her Boeing 737 exploded and nearly sucked a passenger out of the plane. Did you hear the cockpit recording? She stayed calm. Her voice never cracked. She knew

exactly what she was doing. And she brought that big broken bird to a safe landing. I bet a lot of her passengers were reciting the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm on their descent: “Yea though I [plunge] through the [clouds and the shadows] of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

These are two people who show us what courageous, selfless, righteous love looks like. They show us what Jesus looks like. Aaron and Tammie both obeyed the command to love “not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” [1 John 3:18] That’s what the Good Shepherd does and what he calls us to do.

There are some real heroes who are willing to lay down their lives for other people, but I want to tell you about someone who gave her life for all living things. Dorothy Stang was an American nun who went to Brazil and committed her life to defending the rain forest and the poor people who lived in it. Because she was opposed to clear-cutting she made many powerful enemies. Early one morning, she was stopped by some rancher’s henchmen. They asked

this 74-year-old woman if she had any weapons. She said that her only weapon was her Bible. And then she started reciting the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Then they shot her. She fell face down on the earth she had given her life to love.

I tell you this story not to get you on a plane flying to the Amazon but to encourage you to love in truth and in action, to be good shepherds of Creation, right here at home.

Yesterday afternoon I went to the Santa Clara County Water District because there is an outdoor labyrinth there that it is etched with scenes of native flora and fauna and earth-friendly quotes from the likes of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Rachel Carson and Dr. Sues. Some words of Carl Sagan spoke to me. Referring to climate change and our environmental crisis, he said, “Don’t sit this one out. Do something.”

Climate action, earth advocacy, is not a hippie fad. I’m not asking you to follow a trend. I’m asking you to follow the Good



Shepherd. This is not a hobby, like bird watching or mountain climbing. This is a matter of life and death for us all. Jesus has already died to give us new life, so why do we keep doing things that can only lead to more death?

As I pondered these questions, I looked out at the still water in the percolation pond just a few feet away from the labyrinth. It's part of a system of ponds that was built decades ago to recharge the groundwater and keep the valley from sinking. It struck me that what the valley needs, our spirits also need right now. In order to be good shepherds of the Creation, we need to let Jesus be the Good Shepherd of our souls. We need to let the living water of his love percolate deep down into our dried up aquifers. You know what happens when you drain an aquifer? It collapses on itself and can no longer hold water. The same thing will happen to our spirits. So we need to let Jesus recharge our groundwater, refresh our commitment to life in all of its amazing forms and variety so that we

can obey his command to love, not just in word and speech, but in truth and action, and by the grace of God restore the Creation.