

Last Sunday was one of the most beautiful days I have had in a year. To see people be able to return to church after an entire year was holy and breathtaking. God was present with us and I especially felt the presence of the Holy Spirit as I stood behind the communion table. This table, Christ’s table, unites it, it connects us, and it encourages us to continue to be the people of God.

As we continue in this fourth week of Lent, we wander behind Christ from the wilderness to the cross and beyond. The last two weeks Scripture has reminded us that God leads us forward through fire and water. Today we acknowledge God’s sovereignty by our own willingness to follow our Shepherd.

Throughout the Bible we have followed God in many forms. The Israelites followed the pillar of cloud and fire. Later, as in our Scripture for today, the people of God followed the ark of the covenant, the place where God was thought to reside. In 1 Samuel we see the Philistines had taken hold of the ark and decided to return it to Israelite territory.¹ The moment the ark hit Israelite soil there was great rejoicing!

The people of God have always desired to be near the presence of God. This is what the season of Lent is all about. We desire to follow God and be closer to God. We desire to feel at peace in our home in the kingdom of God. God is always leading us, but sometimes we are not willing to follow.

Sometimes we are like stubborn sheep and we want to go our own way. Sometimes we want to take a shortcut, while we may feel like God always takes the long way. Today we give thanks that God intercedes on our behalf as our shepherd.

Throughout the Bible we see that God uplifts shepherds, which at the time was not a sought-after occupation. God called Moses when he was out tending his father-in-law’s sheep. God called David when he was caring for his family’s flock. And God chose the shepherds in the New Testament as some of the first witnesses to the news of the birth of Jesus Christ.

God is our shepherd, and we are the sheep of God’s flock. In Psalm 23 we hear how God leads us: beside still waters, to right paths, and ultimately to the table of grace. On this fourth Sunday of Lent, we are called to wander after our shepherd God, and not stray.

Unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, we have many distractions in our lives that pull our attention away from God. Whether it is family obligation, our jobs, or the everyday tasks of life, it can be easy to walk away from our shepherd.

When we do this, we become more vulnerable to sin. Our focus becomes on surviving and not thriving. This past year of the pandemic, it felt like we were all trying to survive. Perhaps this season of Lent, God is calling us to thrive in our faith in new and creative ways.

I wonder how God our shepherd is calling us to follow at this moment in our lives. Maybe God is calling us to grow in our prayer lives or our understanding of Scripture. Or perhaps God is calling us into new relationships with people in the community. God is always leading us forward, but sometimes we are afraid to follow because we want to be in control.

It is interesting that Psalm 23 is used most often in funerals. I have used it at every funeral I have ever done, and it brings great meaning and comfort to all who utter these words. Commentary challenges us to look at this psalm in a new way: “This psalm is about living, for it puts daily activities, such as eating, drinking, and seeking security, in a radically God-centered perspective that challenges our usual way of thinking...it calls us not to simply claim individual assurance but also to take our place with others in the household of God.”²

When we follow God our shepherd, we see that in every action of our days we can love God and our neighbors. Jesus showed us many examples of how to love our neighbors and that we are better together. In our Gospel lesson from John 9, we see how Jesus provided healing to a man who was blind. This man was a beggar since he had no way of making a living. What is interesting is that this man did not ask to be healed.³ He had been blind since birth. Jesus rubbed mud on his eyes and told him to go wash in a special pool. Miraculously the man was healed and brought back into community. He could now earn a living and like the Samaritan woman, he became a witness to the Messiah.

As we wander after God our shepherd, we also find healing. We know that God will also care for us and provide for our needs. In the very next chapter of John, we see that Jesus now takes on this role as shepherd showing God’s people that He will lead them forward into an abundant life (John 10:10). In John 10 Jesus refers to himself as the “gate” showing that he will give his life for his people.

In the book “The God We Can Know” Rob Fuquay give us some more insight to the life of a shepherd and the sheep he says: “Shepherds use folds to keep their sheep at night. These enclosures provided walls, but the door was just a bare entrance. No gate.”⁴

What is amazing is that the shepherd would become the door.⁵ The shepherd would lay down in the open entry way and protect the sheep from whatever threat came their way. Rob Fuquay tells us: “This is what people would have pictured when Jesus said: “I am the [gate] for the sheep.”⁶

Knowing this information, we see that Jesus was telling the people that just as God protected the people, Jesus also would lead them forward. Jesus ends sharing about himself in this way saying: “¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Our God is a God of abundance. We will also have enough with God.

In John 10 Jesus even claims to be “the good shepherd” who “lays down [his] life for his sheep (John 10:11). Jesus is our shepherd and Jesus is also the paschal lamb. In the Old Testament, God instructed the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb that was without blemish.⁷ They were to put the blood of the lamb on their doors and God would pass over sparing their lives.

In the New Testament we see that Jesus became the lamb to be sacrificed for our sins. On Good Friday we cast our sins upon the cross, recognizing Christ’s sacrificial love for us so that we could have everlasting life.

During Lent, God calls us to be thankful for Christ’s sacrifice. We must first realize the gravity of Christ’s sacrifice for us. Deitrick Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and Lutheran pastor, explains it this way: “Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow...Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives [humanity] the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justified the sinner...Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”⁸

We take 40 days to meditate upon this costly grace of God, this exchange of grace that we can never repay. We repent of our sins and seek to grow closer to God. But, most of all we give thanks that we serve a God of abundance whose grace can cover the sins of the world. Our response to this action of God is thanksgiving and worship.

Even though we cannot sing together or take communion from the one loaf and the one cup, we the body of Christ, are called to continue to give thanks to God our shepherd. We embody our praise to God, when we follow God to places we never dreamed we would go. We embody our praise to God when we find ourselves responding to God’s mission.

Recently I was talking with my friend, missionary and pastor, Rev. Nancy Robinson who shared her definition of a missionary. She said, “You are a missionary when you are participating in God’s work, and when your life speaks of your inward faith.” Nancy is one of those people who can feel at home anywhere because the people of God are her earthly home. Nancy has been all over the world serving God’s people and she is passionate in sparking the passion of mission in others. She has taken great risks as she has put her life on hold in order to go to places she had never been before.

Nancy shared with me about a time when she followed the leading of God our shepherd. Nancy had grown up in Zimbabwe, Africa as a child of two missionaries. Her family left the country quite suddenly in her youth, and she never really got to say goodbye or find closure. That was until one day her pastor asked her if she was interested on going on a mission trip to Zimbabwe.

Immediately Nancy was interested, but she thought: “There is no way I can go.” Family obligation and the cost of the trip kept her from saying yes. Then a woman in her congregation handed her a personal check for: \$3,000 and she was out of excuses. She went on that mission trip and once her feet hit the ground in Zimbabwe, she felt a deep sense of peace. Nancy currently serves as a deacon as the lead pastor of a church in Richmond, Virginia. Nancy never thought she would be serving a local church and yet, there she uses her gifts for mission with her congregation. Nancy continues to be open to wherever God will send her next.

Throughout our lives, God our shepherd will continue to lead us to all different kind of places. Our job is to have the courage to follow God. **The good news for our lives today is that God continues to provide for our needs.** May we continue to wander with our shepherd from the still waters to the cross. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Vol. II. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 356.

² Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Vol. III. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 364.

³ Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 555.

⁴ “The God We Can Know” by Rob Fuquay. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN. P. 61& 62.

⁵ Ibid. P. 62

⁶ Ibid. P. 62.

⁷ NRSV. Exodus 12:5.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “The Cost of Discipleship.” SCM Press: Albans Place, London, 1959.