

April 26, 2015 “Care and Commitment, Every Day” Psalm 23 John 10:11-18 Acts 3:1-10

Peter and John looked at the man intently and then did not give him what he wanted, money. They gave him something much better: life! The man had been unable to walk since he was born, so he had become dependent on others to carry him and to respond to his begging. This had gone on for years; it was all he knew. Peter and John apparently didn't have money, but they had something to offer that would change that man's life forever: “In the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk!” And he did, but he did even more than that!! He went into the Temple, something he had not been allowed to do before, and he danced and praised God.

It gives me chills every time I read this, because it's so amazing, and because when I read it I wonder, deep down, if I've missed something. *Should* we be able to reach out and communicate God's healing power in such a way that lives are absolutely changed and transformed? Have we mainline Christians missed something big?

But lives *are* changed, though not usually so publicly.

Preacher Isaac Villegas, a Mennonite pastor in North Carolina, shared this: “I remember sitting in a hospital room with a man from my congregation who was recovering from a bad stroke. He was telling me about all the other people from church who had visited him that week – several congregants who brought their hymnals and sang with him, another who brought his fiddle and played Appalachian tunes, others who stopped by on lunch breaks or after work. All those churchpeople, he mumbled to me, made it easier to believe in God. When they are with me, he said, I know God is with me...” (*Christian Century*, April 15, 2015, p. 19) You never know how God will use your simple act of kindness or care in the life of someone else. ...

Receiving, and giving. It is said that we spend half of our life breathing in and the other half breathing out. We receive support from others and we give support to others. Neither is possible without the other. In order to breathe in air, we must first exhale. We come to church to receive, and we go forth into the world to give to others. We breathe out and we breathe in, until we do it without even thinking about it. We learn to give and to receive the gift until compassionate living becomes a way of life for us.

Jesus gave us an example of this in the life he lived, for he did not simply heal and teach. He also went to peoples' houses to eat, to receive, to have oil poured over his head; he borrowed donkeys and upper rooms, and his body was laid in a borrowed grave. He received and he gave. And then he gave up his life for the sake of others.

We are given the promise that we have a shepherd who cares about us, who ministers unto us, who knows who we are and what we need. Then, we are called to be like the good shepherd, to imitate his goodness in the ways we treat each other. We get to participate in the work of our Good Shepherd as we follow him.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus called himself the "good shepherd" in contrast to the hired shepherds who cared only for the wages and not much about the responsibilities and dangers of the job. The one who owned the sheep would care about them, would know each one's abilities and needs, would know if one was in trouble, would know their names. A hired hand might not care about the sheep, might not notice if one needed help, might not be willing to risk his own safety in order to save a sheep from danger. The shepherds were called on to put their very lives on the line, to defend their sheep against any and all troubles.

Phillip Keller, who years ago wrote the book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, wrote: "Sheep require more attention than any other livestock. They just can't take care of themselves... They have little means of defense. They're timid, feeble creatures. Their only recourse is to run if no shepherd is there to protect them... A dog, horse, cat, or a bird can find its way home, but when a sheep gets lost, it's a goner unless someone rescues it."

Preacher Clarence Cranford suggested: "We need to remember that the promise 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,' was not written in Oklahoma where 'the corn is as high as an elephant's eye.' It was written in Palestine, where there are some of the most barren and rocky areas to be found anywhere on the face of the earth. The shepherd must not only know about sheep. The shepherd must know how to find grass and water for his sheep." (*Cups of Light*)

As we consider shepherds today, I think of the 15 buffalo who ended up being killed a couple of days ago in upstate New York. They apparently didn't have a very good shepherd, or at least they were not willing to respond to their owners. They ran, endangering themselves and others until the authorities felt that the best choice was to shoot them.

So what does the Good Shepherd look like today, for us? If we are like the sheep of God's pasture (Psalm 100), are we able to respond, or are we acting more like those buffalo?

"Silver and gold have I none, but in the name of Jesus Christ, arise, get up and walk." And the man did. He was healed and provided his first real opportunity in life. The true source of life had restored his life. When we started our service this morning with Psalm 23, we shared the declaration of what the Lord as our Shepherd can do: He makes me to lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters, and he can restore my soul. So many folks I know - myself included much of the time - desperately need our souls to be restored, for our spirits are exhausted, sometimes almost without breath. We have hyperventilated and forgotten to breathe in our relationship with God. We get tangled up in messy relationships or old grudges or big fears or deep worries or all the uncertainties of our lives. We run after things we want to buy and stuff we think we ought to have, and too easily become almost comfortable with being dissatisfied with our lives. Too often we find ourselves feeling good if we can criticize others or at least our politicians and blame them for why life isn't the way we want it to be. We know this kind of existence too well, where we sort of hop from one challenge or crisis to another and somehow make it through, but we also know that this is not *abundant* life; it leaves no room or chance for a restored soul. But we have a Shepherd, God who loves us so much that he

became “God with Us,” Emmanuel, and lived among us in the self-giving Jesus. This Shepherd can settle us down and help us breathe - in and out - again.

Can this be, even today in 2015, or is our Shepherd confounded by life today? Has God shrugged God’s shoulders and said, “You know, I got good reviews back in the 1950's, but now that people have fast computers and easy travel and instant communication and GPS and all sorts of ways to keep themselves busy, I don’t seem to have much sway over them. I guess my hay-day as their Shepherd is over.” Has our Shepherd given up? NEVER!! In fact, the truth is, we need our Shepherd now more than ever, because it’s easier than ever for us to get lost and separated from what will really feed us in life. We lose our breath not so much in pollution as in the complexities and mazes of life today.

As human beings, we need to breathe out and breathe in. Breathe out what is gobbling us up in life, and breathe in the promises of our Creator/Shepherd. Breathe out our addiction to our own comforts, and breathe in the awareness of the needs of someone else. Breathe out our anxieties, and breathe in the love and peace of God. Breathe in the care someone gives us when we’re hurting, and breathe out the same care for someone else going through a tough time.

Silver and gold I may have, but if I do, I pray that I will use them well... For true and final salvation comes from one place: God as revealed to us in the True Shepherd Jesus; God willing to lay down his life for us. World economies will rise and fall. People will suffer all manner of pain and affliction. Earthquakes, tornadoes, cancer will devastate. Our own lives will shake us up time and again both by joy and by difficulty. In the end, there is *one* place worthy of our trust: God. Finally, there is one activity worthy of our time, money, talents, and energy: serving God by doing what our Lord has asked us to do: love God by caring for others. By this, we will have life, and have it abundantly. By this, we will follow the Good Shepherd, and be restored in our souls as we discover that we are part of God's work today. It’s an adventure!

If we follow Jesus, we are asked to dare to offer what he did, forgiveness and love to all people. Imagine what the world would be like should everyone suddenly care as much about their enemies as they do about their own children! The Israelis would offer the Palestinians a homeland; the Iranians would help to rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan; Blacks and Whites in Ferguson and South Carolina and Baltimore and wherever we are would sing and dance and grow together. Christians and those of the Islamic faith would join forces to feed and clothe the weak. Nobody would get their drawers in a wad about whether somebody was gay or straight; and instead of looking for what is wrong with somebody, we would all look to see in each other strengths and gifts and to lift every person up. Each one--each one of us -- would want the best for everyone else, and all of us could rest peacefully in the knowledge that others want the best for us.

Some day. Perhaps this will only become reality when God’s kingdom is fully recognized. But today, in this world, we have God's promise: The Lord is my shepherd! God is watching over me; I shall not want. Even when our world seems like the valley of the shadow of death

because of its violence and anger and inequity, I shall fear no evil, because God is with me.

Silver and Gold we may or may not have, but in this rocky, scary, crime-filled, mixed-motive, terrorist-threatened world, we need not want, for our Shepherd walks with us and CARES for us *every step* of every day. Here is our salvation, and here are our souls restored, for life.

Breathe, in and out, and offer by your living thanks to the living God! Amen.

*Now we sing a song that promises God's presence with us through every stage and moment of our lives, and beyond: I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry, # 2051.*