

May 12, 2019 • Mother's Day • Children's Church

“A Fierce Love”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

It has been said that “the loveliest masterpiece of the heart of God is the heart of a mother”--and as we well know, that could be a birth mother, an adoptive mother, a stepmother, a special aunt, a grandmother, a teacher, a mentor, or in some cases, a really great dad. And to many kids, God has given a loving, mothering congregation, as is this one, for so many children and youth.

The point is, we learn God's amazing love for us through those adults who live it and make it real in our lives. On Mother's Day we lift up mothers of all kinds, all you who live out God's love and do God's work in bearing and nurturing and raising up each new generation of God's people on this earth. Today we honor you and show our love for you and take time to simply pause and reflect and say “thank you.”

Today is also the Fourth Sunday in Easter, this season in which the church is called to live into the meaning and power of the resurrection promise.

The church, for as long as anyone can remember, has set aside this day in the church year and called it “Good Shepherd Sunday” as we hear the words of the familiar 23rd Psalm. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul...”

“The Lord is my Shepherd...” Images of shepherds and sheep, as metaphors for God and God's people, are woven throughout the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments. This makes perfect sense when we think about the role sheep played in life and economy of the holy lands for generations and generations, providing food and wool for clothing. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Moses, and King David, the psalmist, were all shepherds.

The good work of the shepherd was essential to the well-being of the people. They nurtured and tended the flocks. They moved their flocks to fertile, green pastures, making sure they had grass and water. They knew each lamb. And in turn the sheep knew the shepherd's voice as a voice they could trust and follow.

In protecting their flocks, shepherds face danger every day. They must contend with floods, freezing winds and driving snow, with heat and drought. They must fend off thieves and robbers, smugglers, poachers, wild animals—wolves, panthers, hyenas, jackals, coyotes. They lay themselves down for a night's rest in the gap of the fence, their own body becoming the gate that keeps the sheep in and any threat out. They do whatever they need to do to protect their flock.

The love of a shepherd is tender and it is fierce. A shepherd cannot take away the dangerous things of this world, but the shepherd is willing to do anything, willing to give everything—for the flock. Jesus said it this way: “I am the Good Shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” And so, through these Sundays of Eastertide, we journey on with our crucified and resurrected Lord. Through the valley of the shadow of death. For the Good Shepherd has laid down his life for the flock with a love that is tender and fierce.

What a word to hear again now, on this Mother's Day. The parallels between God's love and a mother's love are plain to see. This is love that lays down its life for others, which is, of course, what mothers do, in ways big and small. It is the love that abides in us, as does a mother's love, no matter what. And this love, you see, raises us up and makes us bold, just like a mother's love, because it makes us strong and it gives us courage, just like a mother's love.

And really--don't we all need a good shepherd to help us through this life? Don't we all need people in our lives who know us by name? People whose voice to us is a voice of care and trust and protection. Shepherds who will help keep us on the right path, who are always looking out for us, who love us so much that they'd do anything to insure our safety and well-being. We all need shepherds, sometimes in the guise of mothers, to show us the path of life.

I hate to say it, but like sometimes gullible sheep, we are all too often prone to wander after false shepherds, are we not? We follow the crowd when we should be listening to that inner voice of integrity and clear-thinking. We let ourselves be shepherded by the wrong things, letting them take the place of a good shepherd in our life. False shepherds can lead us astray from common sense and the common good. And sometimes, when they are very sly or very subtle or very seductive, we follow after them and find, not true security, not real peace, but dead-ends of disappointment and deception.

Our Good Shepherd promises another way. The prophet Ezekiel spoke to God's people during the time of their exile in Babylon. To comfort them and restore their hope and give them courage, he called them to envision life in what would be their new promised homeland. He described it as abundant pasture lands tended by a shepherd. This "good shepherd" will seek out missing sheep and rescue them from danger. He will feed them on the mountains and lead them to good water and grazing land. He will care for the sick and the injured and give strength to the weak. He will feed the people with justice and make a covenant of peace. The good shepherd will make God's people to flourish.

Oftentimes, that "good shepherd" love is manifest through the work of the church, as we heard Todd describe this morning in our on-going work in Haiti. Last month, cyclones tore through east Africa, laying to waste villages, homes, farmlands in Mozambique, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. This is another part of our world I cherish and love, so grateful for mission trips that have introduced me to our United Methodist work in these places half-way around the world.

Winds of up to 125 miles per hour, pounding rain, caused rivers to jump their banks, flooding fields and villages. Tin roofs were torn off their small houses made from branches, tree limbs and mud which collapsed. Corn crops just ready for harvest were ruined. How to provide food and shelter became the number one priority for relief workers. The first to show up? The United Methodist Church, opening doors for others to come in and multiply the aid they could provide. On the first day in one town, 1000 people came for help. Town officials had only 500 kilograms of rice and 250 kilograms of beans. With assistance coming from the UMC, they have been able to provide 3 meals a day, sanitation facilities, and make-shift tents set up as refugee centers. Lives are being saved, children rescued, and people fed.

Remember what Jesus told Peter about how he could show his love for Jesus? "Feed my sheep." 3 times he said it. "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."

Give them food, Peter. Give them love. Give them hope. This is the unfailing, everlasting love of the Good Shepherd.

And we, followers of Jesus the Good Shepherd, are called to relief work yes, and more. We are called to be good shepherds of the whole of creation, of all who hunger and thirst now, all who long for freedom and wholeness and justice and peace. This shepherd's love is tender and fierce. It is love that is selfless, compassionate, generous to a fault. This shepherd's love is always doing for the other, always seeking nurture and living water for the flock. The love of the shepherd counts the one as important as the ninety-nine.

Do we not cherish that beautiful promise in the 23rd Psalm, to which God's people have clung for generations and generations: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever..."

Our Good Shepherd has given us a home. It is a place of abundance and beauty. In contrast to the parched places of our lives, it is a place of vibrant and nourishing green pastures. In contrast to the cacophonous noise of our daily lives and frazzled spirits, it is a place of deep, still waters, where silence carries us to the wellsprings of our faith. In contrast to the futile desperation of endless seeking after the latest thing, the newest, hippest, coolest whatever, when we are at home with God, we know that our cup is already filled to overflowing.

To dwell in the house of the Lord, is to be rooted and grounded in the love of God. The house of the Lord is the house of love. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, offers us this house even now. In John 15:4, he says to us: "Make your home in me, as I make my home in you."

May the voice of our Good Shepherd lead us into the house of love, the house of the Lord, where we and all God's precious sheep are at home now and forever. Thanks be to Thee, O God. Thanks forever be unto Thee.

Amen.

Notes:

Opening quote from the Catholic spiritual writer Thérèse of Lisieux

Kathy Gilbert. "After the Cyclone, Faith Abides." United Methodist News Service, May 2019.

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