

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Shawnee, KS

Fr. Jonathan Brice, 22 March 2020

When our kids were little, we would go on holiday to Turkey. We enjoyed exploring little villages, near rural areas. Once we came across a shepherd who had obviously spent weeks in the fields with his sheep. He could have benefitted from a shower and a shave, but we could see that he was totally devoted to caring for his flock. Those sheep looked like they could be a handful, each intent on grazing from its own patch of grass, and prone to wondering off rather than staying safely under the shepherd's care.

Viewing Bible stories through real-life experiences helps us grow in our faith. And we all have added opportunities to do that on our Lenten journey this season. From today's Old Testament reading, Samuel is sent by God to find a king from amongst Jesse's sons. The youngest son, David was out in the fields, tending the sheep, which seems an unlikely place to find a king. Yet the legacy of shepherd David's reign has far surpassed his years on the throne of Israel. Psalm 23 is a favourite Psalm which has steadied us for generations. Even today especially today we value how David drew upon his shepherd experience to meditate on all the ways God cared for him, and continues to care for us.

We know that God is the Good Shepherd. We trust that the Shepherd loves his sheep, he wants the best for us. He's attentive to our concerns, and he'll perfectly provide what we need in due time.

The Truth is, we are quite demanding as human beings. Sometimes God's provision isn't quite what we had in mind.....or he doesn't provide as quickly as we think he should. The Psalm doesn't say, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I want," does it?

There's a difference between want and need, isn't there? Sometimes we think we need something, when in reality it's only a want. Where do you struggle with the difference between need and want? Sometimes it's a subtle matter, difficult to discern. Yet, I think it's good to own up to the ways a want isn't really a need.

I traveled to India a few years ago to work with a charity called Magic Bus. Magic Bus provides transformational experiences for the slum children in Mumbai. I took groups of privileged English teenagers from our boarding school to work with this charity.

It was an amazing experience, and it provided us with a healthy perspective on the difference between want and need. We were really humbled when we saw the living conditions of the kids from the slums, and we were embarrassed at the opulence of our lives, compared to theirs. All of a sudden,

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many of the things I thought I needed in life came into clearer focus, and I saw that they were really just wants, not needs. That was a crucial learning experience for me.

Maybe in your families or vine groups, this week you can reflect on the differences between wants and needs, as part of our Lenten journey.

During Lent, when we give up things we want -- like chocolate or sweets -- we use those pangs of wanting to remind us to connect more closely with God. We can go without chocolate, or eating out... or socialising with friends, but how are we without God? Imagine having to self-isolate and socially distance yourself from God? To not connect with Him through scripture and prayer? How bleak and hopeless would that be? For me, as I distinguish between wants and needs, I began to realise what I need most is a more intimate relationship with Christ. The words, "The Lord is my shepherd I have everything I need" becomes very real.

In addition to helping us reflect on our "wants versus our needs", Psalm 23 reminds us that the Good Shepherd also provides rest for his sheep.

"He lets me rest in green meadows; He leads me beside peaceful streams, He restores my soul."

A while ago I listened to a talk on the margins of life. The speaker said that most of us don't have any margins in our lives. We over-commit our schedules, we overspend our bank accounts, and we over-tax our emotions with too many commitments. The result is we have no margin. Think about the margins on the pages of a book. The margin gives the space we need to read effectively, and if the print were written all the way to the edge of the page, it would be so much more difficult to read. It would tire us out because it's too cluttered.

How much of a printed page in a book is margin, would you say? Would you believe forty-three percent of the average book page is margin! If you and I need margin on book pages to read effectively, how much more do we need margin in our lives to grow in Christ?

When did you last spend time with God in a green meadow or by a peaceful stream, either literally, figuratively, or spiritually? How long has it been since you rested in the Shepherd's arms? When was the last time you felt like your soul was restored? Most of us are going 100 miles-an-hour doing too much, and we fail to take time and rest. We're breathless, and we're overcommitted.

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If we look at life through this lens, then suddenly, we realise that we have been given a gift. This social distancing mandate creates margins in our lives. With that in mind, let's read this beloved Psalm with fresh eyes, inviting God to shape the margins in our lives as healthy spaces to restfully be rather than do.

"The Lord is my shepherd.
I have everything I need.
He lets me rest in green meadows;
He leads me beside peaceful streams,
He restores my soul."

In addition to reflecting on needs versus wants, let's also contemplate margins as part of this week's Lenten journey. How will you fill this space which has suddenly appeared, when life as we know it is postponed? Let's not rush to fill it up . . . let's figure out how to transform these margins into green pastures and still waters where we can spend time with God.

The final part of the Psalm we will focus on today, is the promise that the Good Shepherd will be with us whenever we walk through the dark valleys of this life. These valleys come in different forms, at different times, and are often unpredictable. They may be valleys of uncertainty, isolation or rejection, or they may be valleys of poor health, suffering, or loss. No matter what valley you may be in, the Good Shepherd wants to remind you you're not alone. Whatever valley you may find yourself in right now, God is with you. Cling to that truth. You're not alone, and he wants to walk through this valley with you.

When everyone else abandons you, when the days are the darkest, when you don't feel like you can put one foot in front of the other, and you simply want to give up, stand on this promise:

"Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me."

This promise is reassuring and sustaining, yet we've got to be attentive to the shepherd's voice if we want to experience it.

Jesus said,

"I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and they know me.... They... listen to my voice".

Are you listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd?

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Here is a story which reminds us of what it means to listen intently to our Shepherd, when we are stumbling through dark valleys:

After a hijacked plane slammed into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, many people inside the building were trapped by a cloud of thick, blinding smoke. Police officer Isaac Hoopi ran into the darkness, searching for survivors, and he heard people calling for help. He began shouting back, over and over again, "Head towards my voice! Head towards my voice!" Six people, who had lost all sense of direction in a smoke-filled hallway, heard the officer's shouts, and they followed him. His voice led them out of the building to safety. "Head towards My voice!"

That's the invitation of Jesus the Good Shepherd to each one of us when we are in danger or when we have lost our way. Are we listening for Jesus' voice? When we're in difficult circumstances, are we walking toward him, instead of groping around in the dark?

Thankfully, in this time of isolation, we do not have to distance ourselves from God. And as we draw near to him through prayer and scripture, he meets us where we are.

The psalm ends with the promise, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever." Jesus, our Good Shepherd, offers reconciliation with God and with one another.

This week, may you seek out green pastures and still waters in the margins of your lives, and in that space, may the deepest needs of your heart be filled by our Good Shepherd.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN