

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In the summer of 2020 I was a hospital chaplain. I was in my first year of seminary and I was nervous about it, and I would have been nervous anyway, but the global pandemic happening didn't make anything easier. The chaplain supervisor at the hospital said, "I know you're scared, but it doesn't matter." She said she needed all hands on deck because almost everyone else in my program had dropped out. So... I showed up. And I got to work.

I was assigned to surgical trauma – that's where they put you if you've been shot, or you were in a devastating accident, or you've had an amputation. But soon they had to quarantine a whole wing of the hospital for COVID patients, and everyone else had to move. So, little by little, my floor stopped being for surgical trauma. It became the place they put the dying people. The ones at the end of their lives, but who were dying really, really slowly. Maybe it would take days, maybe months.

Many afternoons I sat at hospital bedsides with people who were not long for this world, who were so far gone in dementia that there was almost nothing left. They couldn't talk to me. They couldn't speak. Sometimes they would look off into the distance, as if they were seeing something – something beautiful. I would try to see it too, but I couldn't.

What I did on those visits with the people who didn't know I was there, is that I would sit next to them and pray. And, if they were religious, I would pray out loud. And I have to tell you something that you will hardly believe. Because almost every time I would pray the words of this psalm, Psalm 23, they would move their mouths along with me.

Let these words wash over you.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he repairs my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will 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 will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

This psalm – Psalm 23 – is the most special kind of prayer. Sweet words that ache in your heart. Words that are so sewn into our souls that they can be found even when our conscious minds and physical bodies are almost at the very end. Words that journey with people from this world into the next, like a boat crossing the river into the holy city of God.

Now, all these years later, I have wondered a new question about this psalm.

I wonder... when we hear this psalm, when we imagine it... actually,

picture it in your head now. Close your eyes. Picture yourself, lying down. See the green pastures, the rolling hills of emerald green. See the still waters, bluer than the sky. There's a smell, too – a beautiful smell, like fresh hay warm in the sun, like linen hung out on a line, like freshly cut grass and new rain.

Feel the grass underneath your feet. The gentle breeze pulling the clouds across the sky.

But then... I have a question. Are you alone?  
Or are you in a flock?

Every time I have ever imagined this scene, I have been alone in paradise. The sole inhabitant of the heavenly meadow.

But my patients – that's not what it was like for them. We said the psalm together. We prayed the prayer together. We were there together.

And – being alone in paradise? That's not what Jesus tells us it's like, either.

Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. I lay down my life for the sheep.

Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.

So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

The Good Shepherd is the one who gathers, expanding a personal psalm into a communal reality.

So the gospel truth is this: the Lord is our shepherd. We shall not want. He makes us lie down in green pastures, he leads us beside still waters, he repairs our souls. When one of us is missing, he finds us. When some of us are wandering, he gathers us. When some of us are exiled, he searches the world to bring us home, so there will be one flock, one shepherd, and all will lay down beside still waters together, and all will gather at the table before us, and all will be anointed and our cups will overflow. And one day, we will all dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

That is our picture of the world God wants... the world God is making.

Though our lection ends on a period, the story continues. The very next verse in John chapter 10, just outside of our lection, tells us that Jesus has said all these things to the Temple Authorities. They have been gathered there, listening, and at this moment, they are divided because of his words. It's not that they didn't understand the metaphor, they just thought it was ridiculous. Some of them said, he must be a demon, he must be out of his mind. Others said, these are not the words of one who has a demon. After all, can a demon do miracles in the name of God? But they couldn't agree on how those words should be understood. How those words should be internalized, by us, the people of God.

This hushed conversation outside of our lection makes me wonder. We have heard those words – I am the good shepherd – so many times in our lives. In fact, every fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday, so we hear these words every year. Churches name themselves after this name of Jesus. Endless paintings portray Jesus with a shepherd's crook and a lamb over his shoulders. But in all the pastoral imagery, in all the green rolling hills and the blue true dream of sky, do we ever take a moment to recognize how extraordinary those words are – not just to the pharisees two thousand years ago, but in our world too, how completely earth-shakingly radical this vision of the world that God is making really is?

In this discourse Jesus tells us that we were not created to live alone in paradise. We were created to do the messy, beautiful work of love in community...love which is vulnerable, which is accountable, which is sometimes scary but always good. It doesn't come easily because every power of this world says that we should stand on our own and not rely on anyone. That we should keep our true selves hidden deep inside, that when someone says how are you we should say fine, thanks, that when someone has hurt you, you shouldn't say anything to avoid rocking the boat. But that was never the way of the good shepherd. And that is not the way of the sheep.

In these next few moments of meditation... imagine. Imagine what would happen if we were not afraid of a love like that, a community like that. In the words of Elizabeth Webb, "imagine if we, the vulnerable flock of the

divine, knew ourselves forever to be pursued by the goodness and mercy of God.”<sup>1</sup> What would happen then?

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<sup>1</sup> From Elizabeth Webb’s comment on Psalm 23 from *Working Preacher*, dated May 11, 2014.