

True Security

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Psalm 23; John 10:1-10
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

Today's Scripture passages, that Cathy just read for us, from Psalm 23 and John 10 teach us about where to find true security in our lives. They are about, "How can we feel safe? How can we feel secure?" These questions are hot questions for many of us under normal circumstances, as fears about security drive everything from national security-related issues to how frequently we reset the passwords on our email systems. But during a time like we're living through now, with the novel coronavirus, questions about safety, security, and fear can go to the next level.

So these texts from Psalm 23 and John 10, these ancient texts, have an eerie way of seeming extremely relevant to our daily lives. They teach us where to find true security that lasts and that the world cannot touch; and more than that, they teach us *how to access* that security.

Psalm 23 resonates with Easter promises. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want; though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." No fear in the presence of the Shepherd. Psalm 23 is a vibrant Easter text, because 'no fear' is the core promise of the gospel. Jesus Christ has overcome sin and the grave, and therefore we do not need to be afraid. No fear in the company of the Shepherd.

But we should notice what this text does *not* say. It does not say, "The Lord is my Shepherd, therefore I will never have any trouble."

It says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, I will not lack, I will have everything that I need. Which, just to state the obvious, with a tip of the hat to Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, is to say, "You can't always get what you want, but in the presence of the Good Shepherd, you will have what you need."

One of the many interesting things about this psalm is how verse 3 and verse 4 come back to back. Verse 3 says that the Lord leads us in right paths, or in paths of righteousness, for his name's sake; when we follow the Lord, we will walk in paths of righteousness. But then verse 4 immediately says, Though I walk through dark valleys, through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

The fact that these verses come back to back suggests that the paths of righteousness, along which the Lord leads us, may very well go through valleys of darkness and shadow and death. Many saints before us have borne witness with their lives that following the good Shepherd can lead you into difficult, and even dangerous, situations; situations of loss and poverty and hurt and conflict. The good shepherd has led those saints along paths of righteousness into difficult situations. But because of the presence of the Shepherd, they were able to go there without undue, paralyzing fear.

This, of course, does not mean that the Shepherd's presence will magically prevent any danger or hurt from touching us. What it means is that the love of God is deeper and broader and more resilient than anything the world can do to you. You have a good Shepherd, who is with you, to guide you, to lead you, and to impart to you a sense of security that the world cannot take away.

And there is more. These texts not only promise us that we are secure in the presence of the good Shepherd. They also teach us how to access that security. The shepherd, John 10 says, "goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Verse 1 describes these strangers, these ones who do not have the best interests of the sheep in mind, as thieves and bandits.

The sheep, the text says, do not *know* the voice of these strangers. That may sound like they've never heard the voice of anyone except their shepherd. But I wonder if the text means something a little more subtle. I can imagine that the sheep have indeed heard the voices of these strangers, these thieves and bandits who want to take advantage of the sheep, but they know that they are not trustworthy, reliable persons. The good shepherd's voice, on the other hand, is a voice that they know and that they trust and that they can pick out of the crowd of noisy, seductive voices that would do them harm.

Many people have observed how a small child can pick out the voice of its mother in a crowded room. The child's ears and heart are tuned to the voice of its mother, because it knows that, out of all the voices around it, the mother's voice is the one that it wants to be with.

That's how we are intended to relate to the good shepherd. We need to spend time with the Good Shepherd, with the Lord, in prayer, learning to distinguish what the Lord's voice feels like inside of us, what the texture of the Lord's voice feels like, where it resonates with us in our bodies, in our hearts, in our chest, in our minds. You may have experienced the feeling in your life when a decision just feels right, when there is a kind of steadiness that comes over you when you have realized what you need to do, even if what you need to do is really difficult. This steadiness that knows what to do – which is very different from being puffed up and cocky, which can actually be quite anxious and insecure – this calm, steady purposefulness is the kind of peace that

passes understanding that God can provide you. And it is possible to develop a familiarity with God's presence and the way God speaks so that you can be in touch with that peace more regularly.

But that kind of familiarity does not come magically or automatically; it requires that we dedicate regular time to being quiet with God. Wise teachers have suggested that spending 20 minutes, twice a day, in quiet prayer and meditation is a good amount of time to develop this kind of familiarity with God's presence. Now, 40 minutes a day can seem like a lot, especially when you're also trying to fit in exercise, and family time, and chores on top of work and other responsibilities. So you may want to start smaller, and build up over time. God can work with whatever time we give him. But I am also aware, from my own family, that watching an old episode of TV show "The Office" – which we've been doing a lot of lately – takes about 20 minutes. And it's not uncommon for us to watch more than 1 episode a day. Which could have given us our 40 minutes right there.

And the fact is, that we are all surrounded by so many other noises, so many other voices that are screaming at us, telling us what to do and what to think, and not all of those voices have our best interests at hearts. We need to devote time to listening to the voice of our Good Shepherd, who will lead us in right paths, who will restore our souls, and whose goodness and mercy are following and pursuing us all the days of our lives.

In closing, we may sense in these powerful texts – as so frequently with biblical texts – that they bring us not only a *profound promise*, but they also issue us a *missional summons*. These texts not only promise us that *we* have a good shepherd, so that we need not live in fear ourselves. They also summon us to live in a shepherd-ly way towards others. For we are very aware that there are people in our lives, people in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our schools, whose lives are wracked with fear. Some of them may be afraid of the virus, some may be afraid of what happens if the money runs out, some may be afraid of what the future holds, and fear may be driving them to different kinds of bad decisions. We *ourselves* are not immune from this kind of exposure to fear. All of which presents the church with an opportunity for carrying the shepherd's promise into the world. When we become aware of someone who is isolated or lonely or frightened, we can invite them into our circles of care, we can invite them into our Christ Care groups or our committees or our teams, we can reach out to those who are already in our groups like this, to see how they're holding up and to let them know, with our care as much as with our words, that they are not alone in the living of your life. Christ *is* risen! Christ is risen indeed. Amen.