



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

May 3, 2009

Easter 4B

By Reverend Donna Barr

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday in which we hear some of the most familiar and much loved words in all of scripture. I find it amazing that these shepherding images in both John's Gospel and Psalm 23 continue to carry so much significance in our 21st century world and lives. I mean how many of us know a shepherd? How many of us have ever herded anything, except maybe a van load of children to soccer practice. Maybe if we lived in England where there are still pastures of grazing sheep or were a rancher out West could we possibly relate to these pastoral images of the life of a shepherd? And yet again and again we return to these words and images. We return to them when we find ourselves brokenhearted, afraid, and alone and when we are anxious and unsure of our future.

In an interview about his book on the 23rd psalm, Rabbi Harold Kushner points out that the psalmist is saying "this is a scary, out-of-control world, but it doesn't scare me, because I know that God is on my side . . . , not on the side of the illness, or the accident, or the terrible thing that happened. And that's enough to give me the confidence."

When we listen to Psalm 23 and the passage about Jesus, our Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep and who knows each of them by name, we are reminded that God is on our side, that even in the valley of the shadow of death the Lord is with us, even when the wolf is about to snatch us our Good Shepherd does not abandon us. On a day like today, when our songs of

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resurrection joy ring out these words are still powerful for us. For, they not only offer us comfort and strength in the midst of our fear and anxiety, but also in the midst of our Alleluias. They give us the hope that God's goodness and mercy will indeed follow us all the days of our lives and the assurance that we will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Some years ago I watched a documentary on Fred Rogers, yes the Mister Rogers that you all know and remember from the children's television program. My own children were among the first generation who watched Mister Roger's Neighborhood. Initially the documentary was a walk down memory lane. But as I continued to learn about this man and watch clips from his show I became increasingly appreciative of Fred Rogers' work and ministry. Rogers was, in fact, ordained as a Presbyterian Pastor during the early years of his show and called by his church to continue his work with young children. I realized that through the medium of television Fred Rogers had created a safe and comforting place for children to come to each day where they knew that whatever they were experiencing in their lives was ok. He acknowledged their fears and anxieties. He talked openly about difficult subjects such as death and divorce. Mister Rogers Neighborhood was also a place of learning, of play and of joy. And I think most importantly, it was a place where each child knew he was special and loved for exactly who he was. I can hear his voice now saying at the end of his song "Won't you be my Neighbor" "I like you just the way you are!"

Commenting on his experience with children in the documentary, he said that when it comes down to it, "all of us, not just children, need to know that we are lovable and capable of loving."

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Mister Rogers Neighborhood embodied the words and images in Psalm 23 and John's Good Shepherd passage. In them we have come to recognize that there is such a place created for all of us, a place of green pastures and still waters, where mercy and goodness is overflowing, where amid the valley and mountaintop experiences of our lives, we are known and loved fully. It is a place where no matter what we are experiencing God is on our side

In this Eastertide when we proclaim that Jesus has indeed risen and through his rising God has offered us the risen life as well, then we believe the risen life must be shared with others. If we claim we are followers of the Good Shepherd, then we are to be his sheepdogs - not barking and growling at the sheep, but leading them to our Shepherd and his green pastures. We do this as we welcome a stranger who enters our doors looking for a place to belong; as we gather around our dinner tables and pray with our families; as we work together to fix up a family's home on Barnes Mountain, and as we offer hot soup to those in need at our community shelter. We do this as we bring the Eucharist to our shut-ins among us and as we invite our children to our summer camps at the Cathedral Domain. We do this as we raise money for our community by baking cakes and frying fish; as we walk the journey with a friend who is coming to terms with a loss or an illness as we offer children the space of encouragement to learn and grow in their reading skills and especially today as we lift up our harmonious voices in praise and thanksgiving. The hope and assurance in the words of Psalm 23 and John's passage are not singled out for us sitting in these pews. The Good Shepherd laid down his life so that the resurrection might be a promise for all.

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My sisters and brothers, let us go forth into the world today and share in the risen life of Christ with one another. Let us together, as our Good Shepherd's one flock, find that place where green pastures and still waters do revive our souls and where we can taste and touch and see God's mercy and goodness, knowing we are so loved that no matter what we experience in our lives, God is on our side.

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