

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

April 17, 2016

“Hearing the Shepherd’s Voice”

Dear friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever been lost? I mean, really really lost?

I remember one time when I was little and I was shopping with my mom. I was probably 6 or 7. I was old enough that I should know enough to tag along with my mom when she looked at something else. She was looking at clothes – and there was a circular rack of clothes and I went and hid in it. I was hiding from my mom. I thought I was so funny.

Until I peeked out from the rack of clothes... and there was no mom in sight.

Mom?

Ummm... mom?

No answer. What do I do? Do I look for her? Do I start walking around the store? Do I stay where I am in hopes that she’ll come back for me? Panic starts. A few minutes go by. I stand at the rack of clothes right where I was, hoping that she’ll just come back. No mama. I wait some more. Finally mom comes back and says “THERE YOU ARE!” I run and hug her. Sweet relief. That hug from my mom feels good and warm and comforting.

Now the tables have turned and I am the mama.

Have you ever lost one of your kids? Oh that is a terrible feeling. One time I was at a playground with the kids... the three biggest kids were playing and – with as many as I have I have to keep counting them. 1-2-3. There they are – 1-2-3- happily playing. Until all of a sudden, I couldn’t find Isaac. Isaac!? Isaac? And all of a sudden, panic sets in. All of the feelings of being lost in my childhood come flooding back. Oh no, I don’t Isaac to feel like that. Find him fast! I can’t find him! I look everywhere. More panic. Where could he have gone?

Thoughts come into my mind that I don’t want to think about. Keep looking. Keep looking. Where is Isaac? I look under a playground structure and all of a sudden hear a “BOO!” Isaac startles me so bad that I fall on the ground. But oh, sweet relief, having my boy in my arms! I laugh and hug him and laugh some more.

Being lost or losing someone are both not fun feelings. The world we live in can absolutely be a scary place. In this lost and scary place, we need someone to help lead us. To guide us. To protect us from scary things.

In today's readings we hear about Jesus being our Good shepherd. One of today's appointed texts is Psalm 23. Many of you probably know this one by heart.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.

The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.

You restore my soul, O Lord, and guide me along right pathways for your name's sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I shall 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, and my cup is running over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

In the world we live in, these can be hard words to hear. With all the things that could happen—with all the things that DO happen—how can we believe a word of this Psalm? Where are these still waters the Psalmist talks about? Where is this goodness and mercy that is supposed to follow us all the days of our lives?

Life is uncertain. There is no question about that. And maybe that is why Psalm 23 was given to us. Maybe it isn't there to put a band-aid on our fears. More likely, it is there to remind us that even when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death—even when the worst thing that could possibly happen to us actually does happen—it is there to remind us that God's presence never goes away.

Somewhere along the way many of us have gotten the notion that God's job is to keep us and our loved ones safe from all harm. But is that really what we are promised? The experience of life teaches us differently. We look around us and we see that tragedy really is no respecter of persons. Suffering is a universal problem. Nobody escapes. We are all in this together. But Psalm 23 reminds us of who is in this with us. It is the Lord. It is our loving God, who promises that even when we are in the deepest valley, God is still walking beside us.

When in today's Gospel reading, Jesus is challenged by the religious teachers of his day, they want him to say just who he is. They are searching for proof that he is the Savior who was promised. Jesus does not give them a straight answer. Rather, he points them to the things he is about. He is teaching and healing and doing works of mercy. And those who have the eyes to see it, and the ears to hear it know that Jesus is indeed the Good Shepherd—the one described in the Psalm. The one who will hold God's followers safe in his hands, no matter what. There is no promise in Jesus' words that we will not suffer. There is no promise that life will become a garden of delight just because we are the Lord's. But there is an incredible promise in his words that goes beyond earthly safety. The promise is this: "No one can snatch his followers out of his hands."

Life is messy. And life is Hard. But right now, in the midst of all of it, Jesus says we can know his voice, and we can know that he has his firm hands on us. But it is important for us to remember what Jesus' hands are like. The hands of Jesus are hands that carry the marks of the nails. The hands of Jesus are the hands that were nailed to a cross. The hands of Jesus are hands that were given up for hopeless and helpless on that long ago Friday. To be safe in Jesus' hands is to be held by one who knows himself what it is to be hurt through the power of others. This is a hard piece for us to understand, I think. We live in a world where power always wins. Victory always goes to the strongest. But having the gift of being God's child—living in the promise that nothing can ever separate us from God's love—that comes only one way. It comes through Jesus giving it all up on the cross. It comes through Jesus dying to forgive all the evil that ever was or ever will be. We do not have a Lord who is unfamiliar with the uncertainties of our human existence. Instead, we have a Lord whose body carries the marks of our reality. His hands carry the scars of what it means to know fear, to know suffering, to know rejection, and yes, even to know death.

As your pastor—I would love to be able to tell you that we would all die of old age, at the age of something over 100. I'd love to be able to tell you that you and your loved ones will be kept safe. But that is not the human story. That is not the witness of Scripture. I can point you to John's vision in the book of Revelation. When John was shown by God what the future we are promised would look like, we see that there—around the throne of the Lord—there, no one knows hunger, and no one is thirsty. And no one has a tear left to shed. Cruelty has come to an end. Threats of violence are behind them. The shadows of the darkest valley are gone forever. They are with the Lord, and all these earthly trials have passed away. This final book of the Bible reminds us of the final page of our lives. This is the promise we treasure. This is the hope that we live by, even in the midst of all the grey and scary things that life brings. No one can snatch you out of Jesus' loving embrace. That's wonderful news. You will be loved by Jesus forever. Nothing can change that. Nothing and no one can snatch you out of your Shepherd's loving hands.

I could end this sermon here, but I want to say one more thing. All that I have just said could lead us to believe that all we have to look forward to is random violence and commonplace evil. It could make us think that we just have to hunker down till we die and can be with the Lord in eternity. But there is something more. And that is this: Because Jesus has promised that we can never be snatched out of his hands, you and I are free to turn ourselves loose in the world to help change what is wrong. We can work to prevent senseless violence. We can work for peace, and we can pray for God to heal our brokenness. “If you want to know where God is in a tragedy,” Mr Rogers mother used to tell him, “Look for the helpers.” That’s us. Because we know that we are okay; because we know that no one or nothing can ever snatch us out of our Lord Jesus’ hands, you and I can be the helpers that the world needs. We are the ones who help make this world a better place. We are the ones who work for justice. We are the ones who pray each day for the healing of this troubled world.

So when you feel like a little lost sheep – alone in a big, dark, scary world– or when you feel like a mama who just lost one of her beloved sheep – know that Jesus will always be holding a firm grip on you. Jesus holds us close in love and will never let you go. Thanks be to God.

Amen.