

“May We Know the Shepherd”
Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

It has been my joy to get to know our Confirmands this year, and you have already heard a sermon from them. You have heard their affirmations of faith – what they believe, where they have been – as Carly shared her statement of faith in the midst of mystery and doubt; as Madison shared a remarkable statement of a robust, complete faith, developed in contours of many aspects of life; and, as each of them shared with our Elders this morning. This group has been on a journey of finding their faith, considering what they believe and testifying to that to you this morning.

This morning I come before you in an opportunity to give a charge to our Confirmands: Madison, Ella, to Logan, to Maddie, to Josie, to Olivia (Olivia nodded because I have said her name wrong all year. [Laughter.] I usually call her, her sister Isabel’s name, and then Sofia, and then I eventually get to Olivia.), and Josie and Phoebe (I confused back and forth all year long as well), so Phoebe and Lucas, Carly and Heidi, it is my prayer for you that you would know the voice of the Shepherd. My prayer for you this morning is this passage: that you would understand who Jesus is and what Jesus offers to you. It is my hope for you that you would know in your life what it is that Jesus desires for you.

This morning we read the 23rd Psalm. We recited this 23rd Psalm yesterday in the internment of my father at my father’s memorial service. I stood before the church, outside in the garden, and my sister and I poured my father’s ashes into a garden, where they would be interred, and we committed him to our Lord – and we read the words of Psalm 23.

I share this with you not to bring you into my life, but to say that you will face pain. As you look around this congregation, you will see others who have buried their fathers and their mothers. You will not escape challenge in this life. There will be struggles. There will be moments when you are seeking to figure out who you are. There will be future times when you are questioning what you believe, and trying to understand who God is, and who you are, relative to God in this world. And, my prayer for you is that you would hear the voice of Christ – this Good Shepherd – who calls to you, who invites you into a life – not an easy life, not a life free of pain or hardship, but a *good* life – a life like the sheep in Psalm 23.

In Psalm 23, the Psalmist David says, *The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want*. He is saying, my Shepherd has given me everything I need. And, throughout your life you will face many things you hope for and you need, and my hope for you is that you find the joy and peace and comfort that Christ offers to you.

In the next line he says, *He makes me lie down in green pastures*. A spiritual director priest in a Catholic retreat center I was in was talking about this, and she asked us this question: “When would sheep lie down in green pastures? Why would you lie down around all of this food?” And her answer was, “Because you already had everything you wanted to eat. You’ve already had all of the grass and clover you wanted, and you are happy to lie down.”

There will be times when we are afraid, when we want for our needs, and my hope for you, my prayer for you, is that you would turn to the Shepherd, who is ready to supply for your needs.

He leads me beside still waters and restores my soul. I don't know much about sheep. I, frankly, don't know much about most animals outside of my dog, Luna, who is crazy. [Laughter.] But, I went on a few horse rides and the folks who were leading us would describe to us [that] you have to be careful crossing water, because the horses are afraid of it. They can't see under the surface of the water. They are afraid of what is under the water. They are afraid they are going to step into it and it is going to hurt them. They will stumble and fall. I imagine it is the same for sheep, too. When they see the turbulent waters they are afraid to step into it. But the Good Shepherd leads the sheep by the still waters. Waters they can see clear to the ground. They know where their footing is and their anxiety is quelled; their soul is restored.

He leads me in right paths for his namesake. There will be times when you do not know which direction to turn, and sometimes as we seek God's direction the answer doesn't come immediately. Sometimes we are left to explore, and wonder, and discern. But I will share with you this: On those times when I have not sought God's direction in those moments; when I have let myself be driven by some other ego or passion, I have not found a satisfactory answer. But, when I turn to Christ, and look for where God would lead me in my life, I come to an answer that is grounded in the Kingdom of God, and I find meaning and purpose and joy.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Some of you will know the pain of loss; some of you will confront darkness in our world. Our Senior Highs this year explored and studied human trafficking and its existence, and it is frankly flourishing in Iowa. We, as a congregation, do not shy from embracing or engaging the evil in our world. When we do, it can be scary. When we encounter how badly people can treat one another it can unsettle us, but we stand with the Good Shepherd who protects us. The one who watches out for us, one who knows our entire life. So, I do not hope a life for you spared from all evil. That is not what God called us to. I hope for you a life when you know the voice of the Shepherd that stands with you, and protects you, in the midst of scary situations.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies and you anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. This is King David sharing this – and King David had some enemies. If you happen to read through the story of King David, people kept attempting to overthrow him or gain power over him. Some day when you watch something like “Game of Thrones” - when you are four or five years older perhaps - or other books like that, you will see that the feudal system was crazy. The normal politics we struggle with – politics like today. The way you went from one regime to another in that day, is you destabilized them, and then you killed every one of their family – every last heir – everybody. It was terrible.

So, having polite enemies in David's world was more than just someone who might get you voted out. But David was able to say, “My Shepherd presents a table for me and he gathers my enemies all around me. They are sitting across from me, and he anoints me with oil.” What that is, is the Prophet saying, “This is the one I have chosen. This is the one I love.” It

is as if God is reminding you of your value – not just for yourself – but sharing that with your enemies - standing behind you, filling your cup. And, in our best days, as our cup overflows, we can share that with our enemies, as the love God shares with us.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. As we consider our future, we are concerned about our own death, as we face our own mortality, even there our Shepherd meets us. Our Shepherd comforts us and grants us a serenity about eternal life, that we will be in the house of our God forever.

The Psalmist in Psalm 23 paints the picture of the Good Shepherd. It is the picture that Jesus is describing as he says to his Disciples, “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and they know me.” And, my prayer for you is that you would receive this gift from your Lord. That you would find and know the voice of the Shepherd, and that you would find peace and comfort and everything you want throughout your life. Amen.