

SERMON TITLE: "The Lord Is My Shepherd"
SERMON TEXT: Psalm 23
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 26, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

In late February and early March, I explained to you that the word *quarantine* was related to the Latin word for 40. In Christian tradition, the 40 days of Lent have been a time of spiritual quarantine, a time to purify oneself of sin prior to the glorious celebration of Easter.

Well, since Easter arrived two weeks ago, we've now moved on to the 50-day season leading up to Pentecost, a holiday so named because of the Greek word for 50. Because this year's season between Easter and Pentecost also includes the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, I thought it might be good for us to spend these 50 days thinking about how God's resurrection of life includes not just Jesus' body or ours, but also the body of our Mother Earth.

Last Sunday, we talked about how God produces an annual miracle: causing brown, dead-looking bulbs and seeds buried in the ground to burst forth to new life. At the end of the service, we went out in the church yard, blessed our garden, and planted some wildflower seeds for our church bees. Like Doubting Thomas who needed to put his hands in Jesus' wounds, when we put our hands in the dirt of a garden, these miracles of agriculture teach us to believe in the resurrection of life.

Today, our earthy scripture is Psalm 23. I invite you to ponder this very familiar passage with me. As an Easter people living on this planet in the year 2020 in the middle of a coronavirus pandemic, what does it mean for us to say, "The Lord is my shepherd"?

1—PSALM 23 AS A COMFORT IN DISTRESS

Probably the first meaning of Psalm 23 that comes to mind is God's incredible comfort to us in times of distress. Paintings of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, with his sheep are so common that we can probably all picture one in our minds very quickly. Inspired by Jesus' parables of the Good

Shepherd and the Lost Sheep, those pictures also illustrate for us this Psalm 23, where God is described not just as *a* shepherd, but as *my* shepherd. Whether we imagine ourselves as one of the obedient sheep near Jesus' feet, a wayward sheep that Jesus is rounding up, or the little lamb that Jesus is carrying on his shoulders, we are comforted in Jesus' very personal and intimate care.

It feels good that God is the one who looks after me—providing the food and water I need, restoring my soul, healing my life, and leading me in the right way to go. With God, the Good Shepherd, caring for me, even though I have to go through very dark and difficult times, I don't have to fear. God will protect me and give me peace. Even when enemies come near me, God flaunts that danger with the bounty of a feast. God anoints me with oil, not only offering a soothing and healing balm, but also indicating that God chooses me and encourages me for an important purpose. I'm assured that God's good blessings and compassionate mercy go with me, and that I shall live in God's house all the days of my life.

This is why we very often read Psalm 23 at graveside services. These words about our shepherd making us lie down in green pastures always seems fitting in the green, grassy expanse of a cemetery. And we who are grieving find it comforting to recite these words in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death, when grief is so very real. We believers accept that there will be times when enemies like death and the coronavirus do overcome us, but even then, we accept the strength and peace that God is with us in the midst of these hard times, grieving with us.

In a reflection article about where is God in this coronavirus pandemic, religious leader and biblical scholar N.T. Wright has written, "Rationalists (including Christian rationalists) want explanations; Romantics (including Christian romantics) want to be given a sigh of relief. But perhaps what we need more than either is to recover the biblical tradition of *lament*." After giving many examples of laments in the Bible, when God's people cried out for answers from God, Wright went on to say, "The mystery of the biblical story is that *God also laments*."¹

God's heart grieves over human tragedy. Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. And surely God grieved when his only begotten son was crucified. The wonder of the Easter story and the comfort of Psalm 23 is that God walks with us through those hard times, restoring life to our souls. God's very presence comforts and assures us that, somehow, all will be well.

2—THE LORD IS THE SHEPHERD OF ALL CREATION

Of course, the comfort of Psalm 23 isn't just that the Lord is *my* shepherd and that *I* shall not want. A second meaning of this beloved scripture is that the Lord connects with all of creation. The Lord is described as a shepherd of sheep that graze in green pastures beside still waters. The Psalmist speaks of valleys and the bounty of earth's produce that God puts on our tables. Even the anointing oil would come from olives grown in orchards, and "dwelling in the house of the Lord" conjures up images of the cedars of Lebanon used in the construction of the Jewish temple.

A contemporary Christian song declares, "Lord of all creation, of water, earth, and sky/ the heavens are your tabernacle, glory to the Lord on high."² Yes, God is the Lord of all creation on earth and in heaven, and God lives not just out there somewhere far away, but also right here on the earth with us. And so what happens here on this physical earth matters to God. God created the universe, the galaxies, our solar system, and our Earth in a certain way, so it would sustain our life. God created this planet with clean air and clean water, and now it's our job to help God keep it that way. This kind of care for the earth isn't just for me and mine, it's also for you and yours, and them and theirs—so that people on other continents; animals, birds, and fish in other oceans; and various kinds of plants and trees can all have the life they need.

I was reading an article the other day about the disappearance of insects from big parts of our country. At first, I thought, well that seems like a good thing. Who likes insects? Don't municipalities spray for mosquitoes in the summer? And don't many farmers spray insecticides on their crops, to keep the plants and produce from being eaten and ruined? Infestations like the locust

plague that's been devastating east Africa over the past few months can be very deadly. That's a horrible tragedy made all the worse by happening at the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic. Famine will likely result. But overuse of chemical insecticides can also be a big problem. God put insects in the world for important reasons. They pollinate food. They break down microbes. They tenderize the soil. They serve as food for birds, reptiles, and other creatures that have their own important purposes in our ecosystem.

Most of you know that our church has a beekeeping ministry. While that can be just a fun hobby, it really is more than that. Beekeeping is a way to help keep the earth in balance, by assisting with pollination of fruits and vegetables that feed us and the world. There's another aspect of our beekeeping ministry that I really like too. Our beekeepers use part of the proceeds from their honey sales to help support a United Methodist missionary in the African country of Ghana. Mozart Adevu is an agricultural missionary who teaches people better ways to grow crops, to raise animals, and to keep bees. These ministries of agricultural education improve the health and financial well-being of his students and their families in significant ways. Their newly-improved agricultural methods also restore the environment of their communities, as they switch from overuse of expensive chemicals and learn to increase their crop yields with more-effective organic farming methods.

In his most recent letter, Mozart wrote about three of his students. Adoma grows vegetables and "loves organic farming because it is safer and cheaper than chemical farming." She's glad she's able "to produce healthier crops" for her family. A student named Abraham has been very successful with beekeeping, sharing his knowledge, and is now raising over 1700 chickens "with organic poultry feed." Another student named Solomon has been training 50 other young farmers to leave chemicals behind and raise healthier crops with organic methods. These sustainable agricultural practices offer hope for Mozart's students, their families, and the earth upon which their livelihood depends.³

Another article I read this week told about the earth care work of United Methodists in West Virginia. Becky Crabtree and her husband Roger are members of the Lindside United Methodist Church, and they raise sheep on their 25-acre farm. Unfortunately, though, a natural gas pipeline has been laid right across their land. Becky protested mightily, at one point even chaining herself to an old car in the pipeline path. But the pipeline company claimed eminent domain and won. Now, Becky says, their “sheep won’t graze up on the hill where they’ve dug because of all the noise.” They can’t sell and move because “federal loan programs won’t finance a home with a pipeline on the property.” That’s because the Crabtrees’ home is now in what’s considered an “incineration zone.” That’s in contrast to an “evacuation zone” where people would have to leave their homes, but *could survive*, if there were a gas leak or an explosion. An explosion in the “incineration zone” would mean immediate death. Not willing to let her beloved farming community die, Becky has gone back to “teaching 9th-grade Earth Science,” hoping to shepherd and raise up a new generation with more eco-friendly values.⁴

Sustainable practices come in many shapes and sizes. Another one I’m interested in is the United Methodist Wespath Investments. Wespath manages or “shepherds” the health and pension funds of United Methodist clergy, as well as endowments and other investments of United Methodist churches, foundations, hospitals, universities, seminaries, and other church-related institutions. Altogether, Wespath “invests nearly \$25 billion in assets,” making it “the largest single pool of faith-based pension assets in the world.” That’s quite a flock of sheep, and so you can imagine that they want to do their shepherding work in as economically sustainable ways as possible.

That’s why, on April 7, Wespath put out a press release indicating that they had just joined the Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance. The Alliance, which now manages \$4.6 trillion, is transitioning “their investment portfolios to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 in alignment with . . . the

Paris Climate Agreement.” Like the Alliance, Wespeth believes that sustaining the earth “is integral to achieving a sustainable economy.”⁵

CONCLUSION

Do you remember the song, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands”? In the first verse at least, that’s all there is to it. Four times, we sing the same words: “He’s got the whole world in his hands.”

Well, the Lord is my shepherd, and the Lord is your shepherd. That brings us a lot of comfort. But God has more sheep than just us. If we do our part to care for the earth, the whole world will be able to rejoice and sing.

¹ <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

² *God of Wonders*, written by Steve Hindalong and Marc Byrd. First recorded in 2000.

³ <https://www.umcmmission.org/share-our-work/news-stories/2020/press-release-and-statements-2020/a-harvest-of-knowledge>

⁴ https://spark.adobe.com/page/KySONXVKE9gPI/?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWVRkbU16RTJabVEyTIRreCIsInQiOiJdTdFFEdGlab2FWQlwwbVNXclZXB1Z3Zkx5ZjBjSTXduM0taNjdacGJcl1I1NHlJaER6WFN1MGVPZjJ2S0w4WUJES2hPXC9PNmRMVGE3MmpKYWpHa3V5cEJ2NTJFdnBPK2RSbVlwNGlyR0ZhSTISYXZMQmVNZ2NKdlNuU1VGm29MMEJwRiJ9

⁵ <https://www.wespath.com/News/PR20200407#!/page:1>