

Sermon – “Hooks and Gates”

Scripture Reading – Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

Good Shepherd and Confirmation Sunday, April 30, 2023

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The first reading on this Good Shepherd Sunday is Psalm 23. This timeless poem, which most scholars regard as a Song of Confidence, articulates the character of the God to whom we belong. We can rest in quiet confidence because we belong to the God who restores, leads, comforts, and fills our lives with goodness and mercy. Listen now to Psalm 23.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

*² God makes me lie down in green pastures;
and leads me beside still waters^d*

³ God restores my soul...

and leads me in right paths for the sake of God's name.

*⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff— they comfort me.*

*⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever. Amen.*

Our second Scripture Reading is John 10:1-10. Christians appropriately hear Psalm 23 in relation to Jesus, who in John 10 said, “I am the good shepherd.” The two metaphors for Jesus in this chapter are shepherd and gate. Both enrich our understanding of Christ’s relationship to those who chose to be a part of his flock. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hears his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Hooks and Gates”

The texts: *I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. Psalm 23:4*

The gatekeeper opens the gate, and the sheep hears his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. John 10:3

Let us pray. Shepherding God, thank you for bending down and lifting each of us to your cheeks and for pursuing us with goodness and mercy all the days of our lives. Thank you for the Shepherd’s hook which guides and rescues and for the Shepherd’s gate which provides safe boundaries and protection. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

On this Confirmation Sunday, both our scripture readings reference the shepherd metaphor to provide insight into the character of our loving, reliable God who has guided each one of these young persons to this milestone on their life journey. Today, Sam, Maria Grace, Abigail, Maria Elizabeth, James, and Macklin stand before us to confirm that Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, is their Lord and Savior.

We list each confirmand’s baptismal date and church in the bulletin to highlight the connectedness between baptism and confirmation. For Sam, Maria Grace, Abigail, and Marie Elizabeth, their parents were present at their baptism and promised to share their faith with them through life’s path. For James, he is being baptized today, at the time of his confirmation just as his mother was baptized at the time of her confirmation in this sanctuary 39 years ago. For Macklin, her baptism occurred on the other side of the world, in St. Petersburg, Russia before she found a home with her mother in Springfield. Today, each of these young people confirm that the faith their parents have taught them along the paths of their life is now their own.

There are many parallels between the work of the shepherd and the work of parenting. The shepherd, like our parents, provides for the necessities of life: green pastures, still waters, and right paths. The shepherd, like our parents, is the gatekeeper and the shepherd’s voice is familiar, a source of comfort, strength, and confidence not unlike our parent’s voices.

Since the Shepherd metaphor is so rich with so many qualities on which to reflect, let us focus on two this morning: hooks and gates. The ancient Hebrew in Psalm 23 proclaims, “I fear no evil; for you “God” are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”

The rod and the staff that provide comfort are not tools for corporal punishment as has been inferred over the years with the saying “spare the rod, spoil the child.” Rather, the rod and staff are instruments for gentle, yet firm guidance, redirection, and setting boundaries. The strength and consistency of this guidance and boundary-setting is both comforting and empowering. The psalmist affirms that the care given is for the sake of the shepherd’s name or in other words, this care is born out of the fundamental character of who the shepherd is. A shepherd’s crook is a long and sturdy stick that has a hook at one end, with the point flared outwards so as not to harm the one guided, redirected, or rescued.

During the first century, John’s gospel elaborates on the responsibility of the Good Shepherd as gatekeeper: *The gatekeeper opens the gate, and the sheep hears his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. John 10:3*

The significance of gatekeeping gained new meaning for Peter and me raising a son on a very busy Hanley Road in Clayton, Missouri. When Paul was two years old, our free-spirited little boy wandered out the backdoor to the end of our front yard. We found him standing on our retaining wall perched above Hanley Road, smiling, and pointing at the cars as they drove swiftly past our house. Needless to say, that spring Peter and his father built and installed a gate with a hook that fully enclosed the white picket fence next to our home. A necessary and helpful boundary was established which provided safety and newfound freedom. Over the years, as I looked out the kitchen window and watched Paul play safely and creatively in the pasture of our backyard, the gate took on new meaning for me. It became a metaphor for the boundaries we are called to set for our children because their creativity does not grow and thrive in chaos but in order, in the safety of a structured environment. Setting boundaries paradoxically offers freedom.

Not all gates are so easily defined, and, as Paul grew older, this one became obsolete. However, the premise, the foundation that boundaries are healthy and necessary is as solid and firm as any I know.

Today, we give thanks for the hooks and gates that have guided, redirected, and set boundaries for our confirmands along the green pastures, still waters, and right paths of their lives. On this momentous day of the faith journey you travel, we leave you with benediction and charge, beloved confirmands:

Remember who you are and to whom you belong. Remember that you are a child of God. Remember that you belong to the loving, reliable Shepherd God, the One who was there to hear your morning cry and the One who will be there when you are old.

Remember that you belong to the God who joined us in our humanity in Christ Jesus, and who then went on to conquer death by dying on a cross. Remember that you are a disciple of the Good Shepherd who forgives, guides, redirects, and sets boundaries.

Remember that you belong to the God who calls you to be a witness to what you believe, to live out your faith in acts of kindness, self-control, and generosity, to love one another as Christ has loved you, and to treat all people with dignity and respect.

Remember also that you are a child of this congregation, Westminster Presbyterian Church. You have a home in this house of God. Here, you will find nourishment, comfort, and strength for the paths you will travel. We will always celebrate you and welcome you home!

See what love the Shepherd God has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is who we are. Amen.