

Sermon – “Goodness and Mercy”

Scripture Reading – Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

Good Shepherd and Confirmation Sunday, April 21, 2024

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The first reading on this Good Shepherd Sunday is Psalm 23. This timeless, familiar, and beloved poem, which most scholars regard as a Song of Confidence, articulates the character of the God to whom we belong. We belong to the One 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 waters¹*

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 10:11-18. Christians understand Psalm 23 in relation to Jesus, who said among the other “I am” statements, “I am the good shepherd.” The shepherd metaphor is expanded by John to emphasize the extent to which the shepherd will go to protect the flock and the intimacy among those who belong to the Shepherd. Such mutual knowing and intimacy could lead to exclusivity except for the reminder that the Shepherd has other sheep who do not belong to this flock. Hear now God's Holy Word.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Goodness and Mercy”

The text: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD. Psalm 23:6*

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. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

A few years following my ordination, my parents traveled to Madrid, Spain where my father worked as a business consultant and my mom toured and shopped. Upon their return, they presented each of their daughters a Lladro’ Handcrafted Porcelain figurine as a keepsake from their journey. The figurine they chose for me is a Shepherdess. The gift is both an affirmation of my chosen profession and a reminder that there were both male and female shepherds in the Bible. Rachel, Jacob’s wife, is identified as a shepherdess in the Book of Genesis.

This lovely porcelain shepherdess is also a reminder that the Shepherd metaphor for Yahweh refers not to God’s gender but to God’s care for us. God, our omnipotent and benevolent Creator, is beyond gender. For this reason, we intentionally minimize the use of the masculine gender for God in our worship at Westminster. When we refer to God only as He, there is a powerful suggestion in its nuance that God is male, reinforcing the patriarchal and hierarchal structure of power in our world, which Jesus, the Good Shepherd, challenged throughout his ministry.

On this Confirmation Sunday, both our scripture readings reference the shepherd metaphor to provide insight into the character of our loving, reliable God who bends down to lift infants and who has guided our “trinity of confirmands” to this milestone on their life journey. Today, William, Juliet and Julianna 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 connection between baptism and confirmation. Today, each of these young people confirm that the faith their parents and the shepherds within this congregation have taught them along the path of their lives is now their own.

We ask each confirmand to write a personal statement of faith which reflects some of what they believe. Each of our confirmand’s statements reveal a strong sense of a Shepherd God watching over them. William writes “I believe that God is always looking over me and helping me to do good in my life and help others.” Juliet writes, “I believe God is always watching us, checking in on us, and is always ready and willing to step in if necessary.” Julianna writes, “I believe that if I just look closer, I will be able to see that God is with me every step of the way. I am learning to notice God in everyday moments.”

Today, we give thanks for the goodness and mercy that have followed William, Juliet, and Julianna along the green pastures, still waters, and right paths of their lives. Goodness refers to virtue, an honorable quality of character or conduct. Mercy is compassion to those in distress, especially when it is within one’s power to punish or harm them. Mercy is forgiveness, benevolence, and kindness.

When we were raising our son Paul, I read a particularly poignant article about the influence a mother had on her son who became a Presbyterian minister. Every time she dropped him off at school or a sports event or a friend's house, she would say as he got out of the car "Remember who you are." It wasn't until some years later that he began to understand what his mother was saying. It wasn't that she was afraid he was going to forget his name. It wasn't even really that she thought he would push the limits of what was acceptable behavior...although this might have been a part of it. No, what his mother wanted him to remember is that he is a child of God. He belongs to a God who loves him and who will walk with him along the green pastures, by the still waters, and through the dark valleys of life. What his mother wanted him to remember is that he belongs to a God who joined us in our humanity and who conquered death by dying on a cross...a God who forgives, a God who accepts all people, a God who provides goodness and mercy all the days of our lives. What his mother wanted him to remember, is that he belongs to a God who calls him to be a witness to what he believes, living out his faith in acts of kindness and generosity, treating others as he would like to be treated...with dignity and respect.

And so today, we, the congregation of Westminster Presbyterian Church join this mother, and say Willian, Juliet, and Julianna. Remember who you are. 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 borning cry and the One who will be there when you are old. Remember that you are a disciple of the Good Shepherd 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. You belong to the Westminster fold and wherever your paths take you, you always have a home with us.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your lives, and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.