The Valley of the Shadow

A Meditation on John 10: 1 – 10 and Psalm 23

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Virtual Grace Presbyterian Church May 3, 2020

Quarantine. Lockdown. Curfew. Or the kinder, more positive phrasing: shelter in place, safer at home. Much like the sheep who are gathered into the sheepfold in the evening, with a shepherd at the door, we have been staying in, staying home because the COVID-19 thief is outside the door. The valley of the shadow of death has come to us; it did not wait for us to come walking through. It has surrounded us like the angel of death on that first Passover night. We wake up in the morning praying that freedom is not just a dream, that freedom awaits us even if the journey will be a long one.

And we know we are the lucky ones because we have places in which to shelter. Clean water flows from our taps and we still have food on our shelves. And so we claim the promises. We have soap and toilet paper and maybe even some hand sanitizer. We have masks to wear or know someone who can find one for us. Or make one for us. We sit down at our dinner tables and cast a glance over our shoulders at the coronavirus enemy watching us, and we stick out our tongues at it, and we give thanks for another day.

If we still have our jobs, let us give thanks.

If we can open our pantry doors and put a meal together, let us give thanks.

If we are still finding ways to be patient with our homebound children, much less teach them, let us give thanks.

If we are able to say “no” today - just today- or just this hour - to the alcohol or drugs or dangerous behaviors which threaten to “steal, kill and destroy” our lives, let us give thanks.

If we live in a home that is safe from weapons, whether those weapons be guns or threatening words, fists or curses, let us give thanks.

If we are still able to pick up the phone, or send a text, or visit across the fence with a neighbor, let us give thanks.

If we are able to see the sky, let us give thanks.

And let us pray that we will continue to remember to give thanks even if it gets harder before it gets better.

If our shelter is truly shelter, it is much easier to trust in a shepherd. And I can say that is true for my shelter, and I feel both grateful and conflicted.

Some days I would rather curl up in a ball than get out of bed. Not many, but some. And I have *everything* I need. It is a combination of things - the sense of uncertainty. Uncertainty that there is no end in sight, and helplessness over not being able to do anything about it. Toss into the mix the new knowledge we have acquired. Not unlike on August 6, 1945 or September 11, 2001 when we had to face up the reality that our world is not as safe as we thought it to be and that we have no idea how to resolve some of the conflicts in which we have been involved. We will remember days such as these when we had to acknowledge that though our nation may be powerful, it isn’t untouchable, and that we are not a perfect nation, have not made perfect choices.

We have gained new knowledge through this pandemic, a knowledge and weight which we have allowed epidemiologists and virologists and pathologists to carry for a long time, but which we now *all* must share. It has made us wonder what other viral thieves and outlaws are waiting and watching. And we worry about what that means and how the world will be forever changed…but unless we are scientists and medical professionals, the worrying is wasted energy. It distracts us. For we have our own work to do.

We are dwelling in the valley of the shadow of death together. Predators lurk behind the rocks. Thieves and outlaws have already scaled the walls of God’s sheepfold. They are already inside, and they all have names: poverty, prejudice, denial, hunger, addiction, violence, hatred. I wish we were as innocent as sheep, but God knows we are not. It is kind and merciful of God to love us as if we were simply sheep. I don’t mean that in the “sheep are stupid” kind of thinking, because sheep are not stupid. They recognize faces and facial expressions, and as we hear in John’s gospel, they recognize voices, as well. Sheep form bonds with one another, they are known to look out for one another. They experience happiness and grief, boredom and fear. Sheep are *not* stupid.

I think it is merciful of God to see us as sheep because we are not that straightforward. We forget that we are sheep. We listen to other voices, and when we listen to those other voices, we allow the thief in us, the outlaw in us, to emerge. Then we can only love in limited or conditional ways. How the shepherd must shake his head when he sees us attempting to scale the wall and creep in like a thief, ignoring the gate we have been using day after day. How the shepherd must laugh as we stand there on our stubby little sheep legs, attempting to climb over! We can enter the easy way, where there is grace for all, forgiveness for all, love for all. I wonder why we feel the need to steal something that has already been given to us?

Jesus calls us by name and guides us to the open gate. As Debi Thomas writes on Journey with Jesus:

*“I am the gate.” Not, “I am the wall, the barrier, the enclosure, the dividing line.”  Not, “I am that which separates, isolates, segregates, and incarcerates.” I am the gate. The door. The opening. The passageway. The place where freedom begins.*

An open gate where freedom begins! Let us be thankful that we can be God’s sheep, and then let us be something more. Wouldn’t sheep make good shepherds? Who better to understand the needs for food, for protection? God needs shepherds, and that is what we are each called to be. Creators of safe spaces, where all God’s sheep may graze, where all God’s children may sleep in safety. God needs us to do the work of gathering stones, of fitting them together, until one wall is carefully built. Then another and another and another. In one wall, we create an opening, and in that opening we place a door. Building the sheepfold isn’t easy; it’s tiresome and tedious. Far from glamorous. We will want to quit when the sun blazes, and we will want to give up when the rain runs down our backs. But we cannot quit until there is safe space for all.

As we emerge from this tragic season, how will we work together with our neighbors to transform our communities? The need for public transportation will be even greater than before. Also true for fair housing, for affordable education. If ever we needed to remove the tax from groceries here in Alabama, now is that time. The need for hope will be greater than ever. The need for partnership, for a sense of unity and cooperation. This is our calling as God’s shepherds.

Can we hold on to our identity as sheep and also grow into the role of shepherds? There will always be thieves. There will always be outlaws. There will always be dark valleys, but God has promised to be present with us in those places. And God has promised more. God has promised to set the table for us even as our enemies are gathered around us. That’s not an easy image. But that image becomes even more complex when we consider Jesus’ example. He went farther than the psalmist could imagine when he invited the enemy to the table. Whether it was a religious leader who challenged him or a disciple who would betray him, he invited the enemy to the table.

We aren’t Jesus and we may never need to sit at a table with our enemies. That might never be safe…but I wonder if we can, within ourselves, extend forgiveness, imagine repair rather than revenge. When you are just a sheep, sitting around a table, with wolves, lions and bears gathered around watching as you fatten yourself up, the last thing you want to do is invite the enemy to the table.

But here is what the shepherd does. The shepherd, resting in the gate to the sheepfold, waits for the thief, the outlaw to come climbing back down, having stolen one of the flock. The shepherd takes the sheep from the thief, and hands them a fish sandwich or some hummus and pita chips. And the shepherd says to the thief, *“All you had to do was ask. I already knew you were hungry.”*

Yes, there are enemies out there. Viruses and diseases, and disasters. There are people who commit terrible crimes. There are also those who have been put down so many times, that they never expect anyone to care. Will we come through this with judgmental hearts or compassionate ones? Will we swing the door open wide, and say, “Come in!” Who will we be?

God is pursuing you with goodness and faithful love. Allow them to overtake you, to wash over you as anointing oil. Live in that light that you may be a light for the world.

Thanks be to God, who is our light. Amen.

<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170418-sheep-are-not-stupid-and-they-are-not-helpless-either>

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2626>