

Easter 4, Year C (RCL)
May 8, 2022
New Song Church
Jane Stewart

Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

Following Jesus

A man lies in a hospital bed, his strength nearly gone, but the twinkle in his eye is not as he assures his friend that he has been richly blessed and is ready to die and to be received into the arms of grace.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

A mother cradles her newborn daughter in her arms, her face radiant with joy. “Isn’t she a miracle? Look at this beautiful gift God has given me!”

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

Her tears spent, she lies back in the thick grass on the riverbank, allowing the sun to calm and comfort her. Her life has come apart at the seams – her partner has left, her son is having trouble at school, her mother is telling her it’s all her fault. And yet, as the sun’s rays warm her, a feeling of peace and tranquility wash over her – an inner certainty that somehow, she’ll get through it all. “Thank you, Lord,” she says out loud. “Thank you.”

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

Just in reading Psalm 23, we feel ourselves beginning to relax, to let go of the worries and tensions of the day, to let go of our anger and frustrations, to let go and to trust God to help us choose the right pathways – even, and perhaps especially, to guide us through the valley of the shadow of death.

It is a Psalm we turn to when the bottom drops out – when we need to be reminded that, in John’s words, Jesus came to give us life – abundant life – “cup running over life” filled with confidence in the goodness and grace of God.

It is a Psalm we turn to when we are filled with gratitude for God’s lavish provision for our needs – for everything from our daily needs for food and shelter to the need to have someone to

walk with us through the difficult times we face during our lives. Perhaps a time such as this one for those of us who fear what an overturned Supreme Court ruling will mean for the health and well-being of women in our country, especially for poor women whose choices are already limited. And what it might mean for other Supreme Court reversals hanging in the balance -- decisions that affect other marginalized people, including some of us here today.

It is a song of childlike trust, but the psalmist's trust is not naïve. It is a song of one who has been through trials – most likely some rather major crises – the kind that threaten to overwhelm and destroy us. But he is rooted and grounded in love, even pursued – chased – by God's goodness and mercy through the whole of his life – the good and the bad together.

Of course, hindsight always gives more light to a situation than trying to muddle our way through the darkness and to figure out where God is in our suffering or our moment of need. But as he looks back over his life, the psalmist sees the clear and steady thread of God's love woven through the complicated pattern of his life. He sees God's loving presence and God's power as a thread which brings order to what might otherwise be chaos. And he gives thanks.

He gives thanks to the God he sees as his shepherd and friend – to the one who leads him, provides for him, offers him community with others, and protects him from danger.

Because God has been his guide, his refuge, and his comfort throughout his life, he feels he is able to face the future with confident hope and without fear – no matter what may be in store for him.

This beautiful and timeless psalm invites us to look back through our own journeys and to see that same thread of God's love and abiding presence weaving its pattern through the sometimes-tangled fabrics of our lives. Think of one of the high points of your life. . . . Can you see that God was there, celebrating with you and increasing your joy? . . . Think of a time of crisis or confusion. . . . Can you see ways in which God was there, loving and supporting you, even if you couldn't see it at the time? Perhaps you can't, but the psalmist invites us to try – to look for God's goodness and mercy in every aspect of life.

The Gospel of John describes Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who keeps us in safety and cares for our needs – the one who transforms our mere existence into life – abundant life.

Borrowing on the imagery of Psalm 23, Jesus is the host who prepares the table before us and

welcomes us as honored guests. He calls to us, inviting us to share in the table of grace each week as we join in celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion so that we may be fed with the bread of life. Holy Communion binds us to Christ, to one another, and to the whole Christian church. Community is important. Church is important because through it we help one another to live lives connected to God.

But being connected to God and following Jesus is more than just feeling safe and secure, having our bellies filled, our souls comforted, and our cares tended to. In her book *The Church Cracked Open* that many of us have read recently, Stephanie Spellers says, “It comes down to asking ourselves what will we place at the center of our lives, and who will we follow?” She says, “That’s a question only discipleship can answer. A disciple is simply one who follows, learns, and patterns their life after another. Everybody is a disciple of something or someone.” Echoing her invitation, “I would invite you now to take a moment and wonder: of what or of whom are you a disciple? Who or what shapes your life and teaches you? Most Christians quickly reply ‘Jesus!’ But does he?” She laments, “I fear that dominant American Christian churches are by and large designed to shape cooperative, peaceful, and kind residents and consumers, and only occasionally to form vibrant, self-giving, world-changing followers of Jesus of Nazareth who love God and love our neighbors, strangers, and even our enemies as we love ourselves.”ⁱ

So what does it mean to hear the voice of Jesus and to follow him? How can we, as individuals and as a congregation, embody the vibrant, self-emptying love we see Jesus embody in the Gospels? The things we’re already doing, caring for one another and for the needs in our community are great, but there is so much more to which the Spirit is calling us and that God wants for us! A first step to discerning what path God is calling us to follow is to grow deeper in our relationship with God, or as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry puts it “to go more deeply into the heart of Jesus.” Bishop Curry says that churches thrive when they live a cruciform life – when they grow deep and reach wide. It seems to me that here at New Song we do a fine job of reaching wide, but I’m reminded of the parable of the seeds falling on various types of soil. We need to take care not to be the seed that is sown on rocky ground that springs up quickly, but also tends to burn out quickly because we lack depth for our spiritual roots. Imagine who we could be together if we were to spend some time cultivating and fertilizing the soil of our hearts, learning to lean into the heart of Jesus! My hope is that this is something we can explore together starting in the fall.

Forward Movement has developed a curriculum based on Bishop Curry's the "Way of Love: seven practices for Jesus-centered life," called "My Way of Love." My Way of Love involves interested individuals taking an online spiritual inventory and then following that up with a 9-week small group study. In a wildly condensed version, The Way of Love offers seven steps to open ourselves to the Spirit and to follow Jesus. As with any good action plan, each step begins with a verb:

1. TURN again and again to God.
2. LEARN Jesus's ways through scripture and holy reading.
3. PRAY and dwell intentionally with God every day.
4. WORSHIP God weekly through community praise, thanksgiving, and petition.
5. BLESS one another by giving our lives away in love.
6. GO across borders to join in solidarity and heal brokenness.
7. REST in God's grace, because the revolution is not ultimately up to us.ⁱⁱ

Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest.

I know I went through those quickly, so I've got some little wallet cards I'd like to pass out to remind ourselves of these 7 steps. . . . [copies are available at New Song on the back table]

I invite you to put this somewhere that you'll see it regularly whether that is in your wallet or on your refrigerator or dresser at home. Read through it when you spot it and begin praying about what steps you might take over the summer to deepen your faith, focusing on one or more of the 7 steps. You are probably already engaging in some of these steps – if so, that's great! Count those, but also consider adding another one or more to your daily or weekly routine. Another thing you can do between now and next fall is to prayerfully consider the possibility of growing deeper in your faith with a small group this coming fall.

Jesus is calling us, not just to trust in his promise to always be with us through the chances and changes of daily life, but more importantly, to follow him on the way to abundant life. So come, let us follow Jesus and be prepared to be surprised by God's grace!

ⁱ Stephanie Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open*, pp. 117-118.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 119.