

Sermon – Quiet Confidence

Scripture Readings – Psalm 23, John 10:14-18

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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. God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside still waters; God restores my soul.

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

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. Amen.

Today's gospel reading is John 10:14-18. John's gospel, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, cultivates a theology of who Christ is. "I am the good shepherd" is one of the "I am" sayings developed by John. The extent to which Christ went in caring for his flock was to lay down his life for them. It was Christ's quiet confidence and trust in God which empowered him to do so. Hear now, God's Holy word.

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 "Quiet Confidence"

Text: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. 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. Give us the quiet confidence of those who know who we are and to whom we belong, that we may be empowered as the body of Christ. Amen.

The first sermon I preached from this pulpit as your pastor was entitled "A Time to Build Up." I remember that day in October of 2013 like it was yesterday. I was excited, hopeful, anxious, a little overwhelmed and yet, confident that God, the Good Shepherd, had guided our feet, Peter's and mine, on the path which led to the privilege of partnering in ministry with this beautiful body of Christ.

As much as it was a mountaintop experience professionally and a time of joy and excitement, on a personal level, I was walking through my own dark valley as my father was dying. The story I shared about my parents that Sunday morning captured the essence of their bond which was a large part of building up who I would become over the years.

I shared the response each of them gave during a newlywed game on a Caribbean cruise celebrating their 65th wedding anniversary. Each couple was asked: "If you could describe marriage in three words, what would they be?" My parents were the final couple to respond, Betty was given the microphone first. The room became quiet with anticipation. What will this woman of experience have to say? Betty spoke succinctly and clearly, with a pithy confidence that becomes her. "Hills and Valleys!" she said, "Hills and valleys!" That's it! Nothing more needed to be said. There was an immediate camaraderie and understanding among all gathered.

Then it was my father's turn. What would Bill say? True to form, my father was delightfully honest and his response reflected yet another point of view, equally valid. "Love and Sex!" my father said, "Love and sex."

Following the uproar of laughter, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the gift of my parents, for their "love and sex" which brought me into the world; and for the "hills and valleys" they traveled together, not always gracefully but with honesty, humor, vulnerability, and yes, a quiet confidence—a willingness to make the best out of the circumstances life presented them along on the paths of their journey together.

And isn't this true for all of us? Whether we are the ancient psalmist rebuilding his life and writing a prayer of confidence about the God who is his shepherd or whether we are traversing our own hills and valleys in this time and place; we do so not always gracefully, but with honesty, humor, vulnerability, and yes, a quiet confidence.

After expressing my deep appreciation for your courage, faith, and confidence in calling me to be your pastor that first Sunday in this pulpit, I affirmed that together we would build up this strong and lovely faith community through healthy and respectful collaboration, open hearts and minds, and attending to the details of ministry. Little did I know then that we would reach this peak of historic groundbreaking in the midst of this valley of pandemic.

What a delight it was last Sunday to come together on an electronic congregational meeting while safely grazing in our own homes, to see the faces we miss, to hear the voices we recognize, and to affirm together overwhelmingly that God's love is stronger than COVID-19. We have been, we are, and we will be Steadfast Neighbors. It is a time to build up and it is a time to reach out. Along with beautifying our grounds and expanding our parking (keeping the economy going), we are investing one third of what we spend on ourselves in the lives of our neighbors through the mission component of this endeavor.

How beautiful is the body of Christ that made the commitment twenty years ago to remain in this neighborhood as a steadfast presence of God's goodness and mercy. How beautiful is the body of Christ that initiated an endowment 25 years ago and built on that investment with an anniversary campaign in 2015 based on the verse from Ephesians 4:13 *to equip the saints for the work of ministry in building up the body of Christ.* Our cups overflow with gratitude for each member of the Albert Hale Circle who made a gift to building a legacy of faith. The interest

and earnings from the principle of Westminster's general endowment is making this time to build up possible.

With quiet confidence in the Shepherd God whose goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives... and with humble gratitude for our Savior, the Good Shepherd, who walked the long dusty roads and the hills to the cross; we will persevere as the body of Christ, separately in our homes for now, yet together in spirit always. We anticipate with deep joy the day we will gather again in this house of the Lord...a steadfast dwelling place for this generation, for those who have come before us and for those who will follow. How beautiful! Amen.