

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 12, 2019
John 10:22-30, Psalm 23
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

John 10:22-30

22At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." 25Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; 26but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. 30The Father and I are one.

I've been thinking a lot this week about friendship. That may seem strange because, as you know, I've had a lot of things on my mind with my mother's passing and all the details that come with transitions like that. But on my mind have been these scripture passages from Psalm 23 and from John 10 that talk about God as a shepherd and about his care for us. The message of these passages, I think, is that we belong to him. We are his sheep, the ones he cares for. I've been thinking about this because I was planning to go out to see my mother this last week, but I was unable to make it out there before she died. I decided to go anyway, because there were things that I could do to help my brother and his wife with some of the arrangements after mom's passing. Packing things up, taking them to Goodwill, making the arrangements for her cremation, meeting with the funeral home, all those things. We'll go back out later in the summer when we can all gather together for the scattering of her ashes. And that's one of the things that has made me sad. Many of you know that my mother grew up here in Michigan and lived most of her life in Colorado, but for the last fourteen years she has lived in Oregon with my younger brother, Ken. And since I'm in Michigan, my older brother Jeff is in Arizona, and my sister is in Colorado, we haven't been able to see my mother very much in the last few years. And that makes me sad.

When I got to Oregon this last Monday night, my sister-in-law Kris wanted to make sure that I was up early enough on Tuesday morning because she wanted me to run some errands with her. Fine. But the first thing she wanted to do was to go to my mother's church, Emmaus Lutheran Church in Eugene. I assumed we were going to meet the pastor, but no, we were going to meet someone more important than that. At Emmaus church there is a quilting group that meets every Tuesday morning to make quilts for baptism, to sell to support mission work, and to give to high school graduates. Kris wanted me to meet these folks because my mom would go to meet with that group every Tuesday. Now, let's be clear, my mom did not quilt. But she would go there and as they quilted, mom would knit. But she went for the friendship, because these folks brought Mom in, loved her, befriended her, and now that she was gone, they joined us in mourning her absence. They were her friends. They were people that God provided for my mom to help take care of her. They were part of God's work as a shepherd.

That's what strikes me most of all about the passage from John, this promise, as the scholar David Lose says: the promise that is at the heart of this passage and, indeed, the whole Gospel: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. *No one will snatch them out of my hand.* What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand."¹

This word, that God will not abandon us, that Jesus will hold on to us through all things, that God will never, ever let us go, is a word that we all need to hear. To the child afraid for her safety at home, to the spouse victimized by domestic violence, to the college student who wonders whether there will be any jobs after graduation, to the person fearful of being stopped by police because of his skin color, to the police officer who never knows what will happen when he arrives on the scene, to the mid career person afraid of losing her career, to the retiree with no idea of what to do absent a career, to the one mired in grief at the loss of a beloved spouse, to the one whose spouse is declining and wonders if there will be anyone someday to care for her, to the person shattered by the disintegration of a

¹ Lose, David. *In the Meantime* . . . April 12, 2016.

relationship.... There are so many times when life conspires to make us feel unsafe and unworthy and it is our job to proclaim in the face of these harsh realities the even greater reality of God's undying, unconditional, and unyielding love. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. *No one will snatch them out of my hand.*"²

And that's why God gives us each other.

I had gone there for a week-long meeting of what is called the PCC—the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations. This is the group of people who write the exams for Presbyterian Seminarians seeking ordination, so it was a very busy, very full week. But they gave us Sunday morning off to go to church. And it was as I was headed to church that I began to receive text messages and calls on my cell phone about what had happened. So as it was happening you all were in my prayers but I was very frustrated at not being here with you. I debated not going to church and just waiting for updates in my hotel room but a couple of the others in our group convinced me to walk to church with them. We went to a small neighborhood Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Madison Square Presbyterian Church. There were maybe sixty or so people in worship there, but they were of all ages, all races and seven or eight people at least came up to us and greeted us before worship began and asked our names and were very friendly. But I was still feeling that I wanted to be back here. Then the service began. In that church it was also communion Sunday, and so after the announcements one of the elders came first to the baptismal font and poured water into it and said first in Spanish and then in English, "This is the font of identity." Then another elder went to the communion table and said, "This is the table at which we are nourished." Then a third elder stood at the lectern, lifted the Bible and said, "This is the book of memory and hope." Then the pastor stood in the middle of the chancel, stretched out his arms and said, "You are the children of God, this is his house and so I say to you all, Welcome home." And tears were in my eyes, because I knew I was where I was supposed to be—whether I was here or there, I was home with the people of God. At its very best, that is what the

² Lose. April 12, 2106.

church is, this is who we are, we are the people of God who care for each other and who welcome all of God's children home.

Veronica Goins, pastor of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City, California tells one of my favorite stories about her childhood in the Bay area. As a young girl one of her friends got lost in the city and wandered up and down the streets trying to find her way home. Eventually the police found her and picked up this crying girl and tried to get her to tell them her address. She didn't remember but eventually as they drove around the neighborhoods the little girl saw something she recognized and she cried out, "Stop! There's my church. I can always find my way home from there." The Lord is our shepherd—surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Welcome home.