

A FIERCE LOVE

Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

“The Gospels make it clear that Jesus kept showing up at the wrong places.... The Pharisees were angry that he ate with sinners, and the sinners were disappointed that he ate with a Pharisee. He had a clandestine night meeting with the righteous Nicodemus and a very public meeting with an adulterer. He tended to like storms at sea, and he went to a Gentile graveyard to care for a man driven out of his mind by a legion of demons.... He was born, as the incarnation of God, in a very wrong place. In the end the crowds defiled him by throwing him into the house of Pilate, a Gentile, so he could be put on the wrongest place of all – a cross” (pp. 167-168). Craig Barnes wrote this in *Diary of a Pastor’s Soul*.

In this Easter season, we encounter Jesus not in wrong places so much as in unexpected places. On Easter Sunday, we read about his unexpected absence from the tomb. Last week, we found him as the unexpected companion to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. And in future weeks, he will make appearances that are unexpected, if for no other reason than we do not expect the dead to be alive.

The only surprise about this week’s story is that we read it in the Easter season. Taking place before the crucifixion, we are not encountering the resurrected Jesus. I would assume that the lectionary committee includes it because Jesus makes a claim that “he has power to take his life up again,” a clear reference to the resurrection. I also think that the image of Jesus as the good shepherd has more of a resurrected feel to it over the course of Christian history. In fact some images are clearly the resurrected Christ as good shepherd.

One of the earliest images in Christian art, it has become quite popular today. It has a feel of “rightness” to us. We find comfort in the assurance that the shepherd will protect us from danger. And yet there is something in the way that John tells the story that should surprise us and challenges our assumptions about Jesus and ourselves. As he was in so many other circumstances, Jesus is the wrong person in the wrong place challenging us to rethink how we look at ourselves and our lives.

The first thing about this imagery that makes us feel uncomfortable, if we are honest with ourselves, is that we are sheep. This does not mean that we are stupid or smelly or any number of unsavory characteristics that we attribute to sheep. Nor does it mean as my children thought when they were younger, that we are “cute.” The salient point of the analogy, based on the presence of wolves and implication of danger, is that we are vulnerable.

We enter this world defenseless and unable to provide for ourselves. We rely on others to feed us, to clothe us, and to shelter us. Only gradually do we take responsibility for

these things ourselves. Little by little we chip away at this vulnerability, hoping someday to achieve complete self-sufficiency. We replace our hunger for food with other hungers for companionship, an adequate income, or a meaningful life. We want the roof over our heads to be bigger and better. We want the clothes we wear to offer a certain level of comfort or present a nice appearance.

The protective shell we construct around ourselves is never enough to ward off all the dangers we can imagine. The wolves are always lurking, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Okay, that sounds a little gloomy, but we all have our vulnerabilities, our tender spots where we are easily hurt; and we don't like that.

When we're talking about faith, that thing that binds us together as one flock, we are utterly dependent on Jesus, whom Hebrews describes as the author and perfecter of our faith. This makes us followers. We don't choose the path we walk on or the field we graze in. And even though Jesus chooses safe pastures and paths that lead to life abundant, we don't much like that. We'd prefer to have some say in the matter. We want to occasionally wander, to check out other pastures. Sheep are prone to do this. And when we do, we often end up in the wrong place. We end up lost or in poorer pastures because we're sheep.

We'd prefer not to be sheep. We'd prefer to be smarter, make better decisions, do the right thing all by ourselves. We'd prefer to do away with the parental controls, lose the shepherd. We raise our children to become independent. Why doesn't faith work the same way? We don't stay children. Couldn't we become something other than sheep?

Well, no, we can't. Today we recognize that mothers don't stop being mothers when their children grow up. They may parent differently, but they don't stop being parents. When their children find themselves in the wrong place, mothers come find them, and sometimes they make sacrifices for them, and other times they bring new life to them. I wonder if it would be too much to say that a mother, a good mother, "has power to lay down her life for a child... and she has power to take it up again" for their sake? I don't think that's overstating the case. How blessed would be the child of any age who had a mother like this!

This is what the good shepherd does for the sheep also. When the sheep are in the wrong place, the shepherd finds them because this shepherd, Jesus, knows about wrong places. This shepherd isn't afraid to make sacrifices. This shepherd, as we learned in Holy Week, will even lay down his life. That's a fierce love, but it's not the limit of the shepherd's love.

It's not enough to die for another. The sheep go on living, and they haven't gotten smarter. They may hunker down in a safe place, but one day they'll wander again and find themselves in the wrong place once again. That's why this is an Easter text, because somehow when the sheep get lost again, the shepherd finds them. The shepherd takes up his life again. And that's an even fiercer love. A love that steps between danger and our vulnerability. A love that doesn't stay dead, that refuses to leave the sheep alone, even for a moment. A love that places itself in the wrong place for our sake.

Like many people, my mother is no longer with us, but in the faith community, I find that there are many who are as a mother to me, especially when I'm not in a good place. There are moms who tend me when I'm not feeling well; moms who step in and relieve some of the burdens of ministry; moms who offer encouraging words when I struggle with something; and moms whose wisdom and knowledge of faith nurture me. We rightly celebrate our moms and those who are as mothers to us on this day.

I can't think of a better day to celebrate the good shepherd whose love fiercely defies danger to heal our vulnerabilities; whose love enters the wrong places of our lives to restore us to green pastures, and sets our feet on the path to life. Such a love will sacrifice life... and take it up again, that we need never be alone. Amen.

Barnes, M. Craig. *Diary of a Pastor's Soul*. Brazos Press: Grand Rapids MI. 2020