
Days Like This...

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Easter 4 – Year B**

In the name of the God of Creation who loves us all. Amen. Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral on this 4th Sunday of Easter. The texts for today are full of rich images of green pastures, sheep and their shepherds, and deep, still waters. They are comforting images, for the most part. Indeed, this past week we observed the Feast Day of John Muir and Hutson Stuck, both now listed in *Holy Women, Holy Men*. Stuck (1863-1920), was an Episcopal priest, mountain-climber, and explorer and was the first to ascend Denali (Mt. McKinley) in 1913. He later wrote of the experience as a "privileged communion" to be received in awe and wonder. Over time, this sense of wonder in God's creation has deepened for me, and both the Psalm and today's Gospel have as their contexts the deep and abiding gift that is our natural world. We are called to be good stewards of creation, shepherds, if you will, in relation to what God has given us. We recall that sheepfolds, for example, which form the context for this section of John's Gospel, were located just inside or barely outside the village. Each evening all the sheep of the village would be herded into the common area, and their shepherds would take turns guarding the gate. When night fell and all was quiet and secure, the shepherd would lie down to rest at the opening of the sheepfold, becoming, as it were, the human gate for the sheep. Getting to the sheep required getting over or past the shepherd.

For all its limitations the metaphor of the Good Shepherd works in this sense. For like the shepherd, parents, grandparents, godparents, teachers, mentors, priests, and friends have "tended" us. Indeed, the word *tend* comes from the same Latin root—*attendere*—that gives us the word **attend**, and it means to **pay attention**, to care for, to minister, to "stretch out." Think for a moment of those along the way who have "stretched out"—a wonderful term—to you and me. We all have such persons in our lives. They have loved and taught and led and comforted and mentored us. They have tended to us by paying attention to us, and in so doing, telling us that we matter. They have sought to prepare us for life. They have demonstrated what Carl Jung would call maternal or feminine archetypes, though not all of them have been our biological mothers. Not all of them have been women. But all of them *have* provided for us what my colleagues in clinical work call a "holding environment" out of which the Divine spark given to each of us can emerge. We can find this language of the holding environment of our creation in the Collect for Thursday of this past week, the Feast Day of Muir and Stuck: "We offer thanks to the Creator of the earth and all that inhabits it for thy prophets John Muir and Hudson Stuck, who rejoiced in your beauty made known in the natural world..." The reading calls upon parishioners to be "inspired by their love of thy creation," so that "we may be wise and faithful stewards of the world God has created, that generations to come may also lie down to rest among the pines and rise refreshed for their work....." Good shepherds and faithful stewards indeed. And in this safe context of the holding environment—not unlike a sheepfold—we internalize this care in such a way as to make it part of our narrative—our story. John Muir famously said "***I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.***" The same might be said of commitment to this beloved Cathedral community.

In this context of care we discover, as Gerard Manley Hopkins said, our true voice "***Acting in God's eye, who in God's eye we are.***" This is a life-long journey, one we share with the people of Israel who, after all, struggled for a home that they were always trying to get into, hold onto or get back to. They struggled for peace, for food, and for their faith in God. Psalm 23 was a cherished hymn for the Hebrews precisely because of the highs and lows of Israel's history, their insatiable thirst on long desert journey's, and their frequent rush down more manageable paths towards more manageable gods, which always led them into unmanageable trouble and lamentation. Then they would return to worship, and the story—the narrative—of their true calling

as a people, would be told and retold. In a sense then, context is everything in relation both to the 23rd Psalm and the Gospel text for today.

Many of us have no trouble finding green pastures. The problem is that next the pasture over so often seems so much greener, and we are scared of missing it. It's not surprising that so many of the psalms describe the disruptive experience of being lost and found, judged and forgiven, sent away, and brought back. This is all part of the pathos of a people who got scared and lost their way, and the high drama of a God who searches to find God's lost sheep. And we get so scared, do we not, when we are afraid there will not be "enough," even when we aren't quite sure what **enough** would look like, or even what it is we are afraid we will not have enough of. Each of us has been scared. Perhaps it took the form of an illness, a call from the Dr about an unexpected diagnosis; a plummeting stock market; or a call from the police late at night. Perhaps it was a letter on the kitchen counter that said, "I'm not coming back," or a pink slip one Friday afternoon. The shadow of the valley, like the Good Friday losses of our lives, can take infinite forms. I bear witness to them in my clinical practice, and in my own life, just as you have in yours. In his book "The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life," David Brooks says that he has observed two kinds of response to such loss.

...Life had thrown them into the valley, as it throws most of us into the valley at one point or another. They were suffering and adrift, and some people are broken by this kind of pain and grief. They seem to get smaller and more afraid, and never recover. They get angry, resentful and tribal.

But other people are broken open. The theologian Paul Tillich wrote that suffering upends the normal patterns of life and reminds you that you are not who you thought you were. The basement of your soul is much deeper than you knew. Some people look into the hidden depths of themselves and they realize that success won't fill those spaces. Only a spiritual life and unconditional love from family and friends will do. They realize how lucky they are. They are down in the valley, but ...they're about to be dragged on an adventure that will leave them transformed.

This, Dear One's, is our journey from Good Friday to Easter. In the Gospel for today we have a description not only of how Jesus relates to us, but how we are to relate to one another and in so doing, become transformed. Jesus says *I have come to the sheep that they might have life and have it more abundantly*. We are called to abide with one another as Jesus abides with us. This is how those who cared for us remain with us: we hold their voices inside us, and we remember that we have been seen, that others have "stretched out" for us. The shepherd could lead because the sheep could hear his voice, could see him moving steadily ahead of them, and they trusted him. Ultimately, of course, we are all called to be Shepherds, all called to create together a safe sheepfold within which we are nurtured, sustained, and nourished. Our own beloved Cathedral community seeks to be such a place of grace, and hospitality. It has been such a gift and a joy to serve here with all of you.

This semester in one of my seminary classes we covered topics such as addiction, mental illness, psychology and religion, and family systems theory. Through each module an abiding image was that of the pastoral caregiver as a shepherd, staying in relationship, with transcendence of self in commitment to the common good. We have studied, and learned together, in order to remember that it is more important to be in right relationship than it is to be right, and we can love completely without complete understanding. As Richard Rohr reminds us, ***"Until and unless Christ is experienced as a living relationship between people, the Gospel remains largely an abstraction. Until Christ is passed on personally through faithfulness and forgiveness, through concrete bonds of union, I doubt whether he is passed on by words, sermons, institutions, or ideas."*** Well, in this Eastertide season we are called to discern, each in our own way, in our quotidian daily lives, what Resurrection means to us. And yes, I believe this involves some transcendence of self, and the joy that comes from giving ourselves away in love. In one of my favorite of his songs Van Morrison sings "Mama told me there'd be Days like this..." Upon hearing only the title, we might be tempted to anticipate a song of lamentations...a litany of hard times. Instead, the song paradoxically is about those days when, against all odds, we are surprised by joy...which is after all, an Easter narrative! Morrison sings—

***When it's not always raining there'll be days like this
When there's no one complaining there'll be days like this
When everything falls into place like the flick of a switch
Well my mama told me there'll be days like this***

In this Eastertide season we might take a cue from Mr. Morrison, and using our theological imagination, add to his verses...and we have plenty good reason to do so:

**When the tomb turns up empty, there'll be days like this...
When we fear no evil, there'll be days like this...**

When my soul is revived, there'll be days like this...
When my cup runneth over, there'll be days like this...
When the shepherd tends us, there'll be days like this...
When we care for creation, there'll be days like this...
When we love one another, there'll be days like this...
When goodbye is Godspeed, and love abides...
Jesus told us there'll be days like this!

Yes, bearing witness, stretching out, attending, feeding, sustaining, healing, guiding, letting our voices guide those in need...these are the tasks to which we are called in beloved community. We are children of God, made in God's image, growing as we move on in faith. We do not know what wonders God has in store for us, but we do know we are called to listen, and to give ourselves away in love. ***"What do I risk to tell you this," Mary Oliver said, "which is all that I know? Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world."*** As our Collect for today says; "O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: ***Grant that when we hear God's voice we may know the One who calls us each by name, and follow where God leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever."*** ***When God calls, and we follow, there'll be days like this!***

And let the people of God say, AMEN.