

“Shepherding God’s Creation”
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
April 22, 2018
Earth Day

Psalm 23
John 10:11-18
1 John 3:16-24

When I was in college, I spent two years working as a camp counselor and lifeguard at Camp Calvin, the Greater Atlanta Presbytery’s version of Camp Johnsonburg. I still remember my staff orientation from my first year there. The camp director asked us to imagine someone who had played a mentoring role in our lives. We were then asked to take some time and write on a piece of paper three characteristics that we admired in that mentor. I thought carefully to come up with the three things I admired most in the person I had picked. My camp director then told us, the group of counselors in training, that the three things we wrote down are actually strengths we have within ourselves. She said that because these characteristics resonated with us, we already carried some of that quality within us. It may not be cultivated yet, but we could work on that. She told us to remember those three characteristics and to let them be guiding values for our leadership over the summer.

I took her advice to heart, and I am convinced those wise words helped to make me a better counselor that summer and a better leader beyond that. Any good leadership qualities you see in me have probably been called forth by someone who shepherded me in a way that recognized my gifts and helped to make them stronger. If there is any way that I can in turn do that for someone else, I consider it an honor and a blessing.

Shepherding is an important theme in both the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. What comfort Psalm 23 has given people, including myself, in times of anxiety or uncertainty. It is the most requested scripture at funerals over which I have presided. It is also a lovely practice for children to memorize the Psalm, and my hope is that we can build it into our Sunday School curriculum to help our children memorize the 23rd Psalm. To count on a God who will be our Shepherd, who will lead us beside still waters and to eat from the greenest pastures, is a deep comfort. To know this God shepherds us through the darkest valleys, and sets a table where we might peacefully share a meal with our enemies, teaches us to imagine holy possibilities beyond that which we fear most. If you have not memorized this Psalm as an adult, it is worth trying as a spiritual practice-- and, it's so short it makes it easy enough to learn even for those who have a clumsy memory.

Jesus builds on this notion of shepherding. He designates himself as the Good Shepherd in John's gospel-- who goes above and beyond the role of hired hand, willing if the wolf comes to lay down his life for the sheep. But like my summer camp director, Jesus was also using an image that would call forth something with his disciples. He was preparing them to be shepherds as well. As Jesus said to Simon Peter after the resurrection, "Do you love me? Then feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep."

I have never experienced shepherding of sheep, goats, or any other hooved creature. But I have shepherded children. My mother-in-law's last words to us before we left for The Philippines was, "Don't let my grandchildren out of your sight!" And so we kept my daughter and my nephew safely within grabbing distance through busy airports, crowded marketplaces, and ocean water. We fed them when they were cranky and entertained them when they were bored. I cannot tell you how many games of magnetic bingo and I-Spy games were played.

I can tell you that I did my best job as a shepherd when I could rotate out with one of the other three adults traveling in our caravan. There are only so many I-Spy games one can play without becoming as cranky as a restless child. But just at the point when that would happen, another parent among us would swoop in with a fresher supply of patience and imagination, so that I could be alone with my thoughts or my novel, or free to snorkel and discover sea-life at depths our children did not care to see. Then, once refreshed, I could be the parent who offered more patience and nurture. I often think about my mom who raised my sister and me mostly by herself after she and my dad divorced when I was two. I am in awe of all she was able to do to raise us right when she did not have someone to regularly swap out as shepherd and give her rest.

Now I know we think of God as having an endless supply of energy for our care. But consider this: what if God wants or even needs our help to shepherd each other, and shepherd God's creation, so that God can have Sabbath rest, or so that God can work on God's next great act in an ever-unfolding creation? Jesus certainly seems to be preparing us to share in the sacred act of shepherding, if we look at his command to Peter to "feed my sheep." Further, in the 1 John epistle, we are told to "love not in word or speech, but in truth and action." The writer instructs that all who Jesus' commandment to love one another abide in Jesus, and Jesus abides in them. In a sense, just as Jesus has shepherded us, we get to shepherd each other-- and in doing so, we have that piece of Jesus that abides, or lives, in us.

I speak about shepherding one another, but on this Earth Day Sunday, let me also speak of our call to shepherd God's earth. While the Genesis creation story sets up humans as stewards of God's creation, we have made ourselves masters of it. Instead of giving creation our care and reverence, we have treated our earth as expendable, like it can be cast aside when its usefulness has been depleted. Our role in personal responsibility certainly matters; things like water usage, meat consumption,

transportation habits, and recycling are direct ways we can pay attention to the individual footprint we leave on God's creation. But realistically it is too late for our individual efforts-- even when added up-- to reverse the damage that has been done to our planet. Change has to be bigger than what we can do as individuals. We need systemic change: laws and policies that provide a moral framework for how we as a society, and we as a global and economic system treat the earth. I saw when we were in The Philippines that there were no trash cans; instead there were bins that separated cans and bottles, paper, and biodegradable garbage. For the most part, stores did not even sell things that did not fit into those categories. Even plastic shopping bags were banned by the malls. More drastic than that, next week the gorgeous Philippine beach island of Borocay, which is one of the country's top tourist destinations, will close for a 6-month period of environmental restoration. 36,000 workers will be displaced; however the unrestricted growth has made a literal toilet out of the beaches, since corruption has allowed the growth of illegal resorts that pump human waste right into the ocean.

It is one thing for a country to manage a planned action for restoration of the environment, as life-changing as that may be for its workers who depend on the economy of the island for their incomes. But the costs of global warming also create unplanned crises. War, natural disaster, and famine are also directly caused by global warming. For now, the US is mostly shielded from these crises, unlike countries whose geographic positioning make them more vulnerable to the global effects of a warming planet. But our time will come too, when extreme responses to environmental crises are not a choice but a survival skill. My deep prayer is that we make important choices for change *before* we get to that point.

Now, all of this may seem daunting, considering we are just individuals facing systems much bigger and more powerful than we are. But remember again what the scriptures tell us about Jesus: "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them." Christians, the holy

abides in you! Do not underestimate the power that can bring. Instead, be shepherds of that power. Lead it beside the clear, still waters. Let it graze in the greenest pastures. Then, show it the valley of the shadow of death, and do not be afraid. For in shepherding this power, we will find not only our restoration, but also the restoration of creation. Thanks be to God!
Amen.