



Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571

Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 25, 2021

Prelude:

Shepard Us O God

W Ness

Call to Worship:

God is like the gentle shepherd,
Leading us beyond our wants,
Leading us beyond our fears,
Leading us to a place of rest,
Where we sing the music of God's love
And feel new strength to walk through the valleys and shadows of life.

A Time of Prayer:

Lord God in heaven, today we gather as your people to worship you in spirit and truth. We celebrate your life in us and celebrate your body, the church. Help us to reflect your love for us with the love we have for each other. It is with great joy that we come before you today, joined by your Spirit. Thank you for your love and mercy shown to us. Thank you that we can comfort another with the same love and mercy that has comforted us. Praise be to you, our Shepherd. We are your people, the sheep of your pasture. Help us today to understand more fully how you have made us to live together and serve each other. Help us to understand your plan for your body and to give you praise. Amen.

Opening Hymn:

“Abide With Me”

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's pow'r?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;
Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Psalm 23 (RSV)

23 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
2 he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
3 he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil; for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Musical Interlude:

“Jesus, Joy of Our Desiring”

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

As we come to you in prayer, O God, we offer our thanks that you are always present to us even though there are times when we are not present to you. We thank you that you call us by name, even though there are times when we take your name in vain. We are sorry for the times when we have not been present to you, and for all the times when we have looked for you in all the wrong places. We ask that you would instill in us a sensitivity to your presence as we find your glory in the majesty of a sunset and in the smile of a child.

We are thankful that when we find a human need and fill it, you are there. We offer gratitude for the courage of martyrs who confront conflict with nonviolence. Help us likewise to search for options for a better way. Awaken us to the opportunities for ministry. Inspire us to pray for peace and for healing of our broken world and our broken relationships. Expand our horizons that we might know that wherever we are, you are there for even as we seek you, you have already found us. Help us to so live out our lives that when we meet you face to face, we might hear you say, “You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. With you, I am well pleased.”

And now O God, we remember those words which he taught us to pray to you in saying.... “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

The Message: “The Field Trip”

It’s a teacher’s worst nightmare: You’re on a field trip to the city, and you lose a kid! You can deal with complaining, vomiting, yelling and tomfoolery. But you can’t misplace a child. Think now of the psalmist’s description of the shepherd who’s leading his flock out from the fold and into the world of pasture, predators and perils. Is this shepherd up to the job?

Mrs. Morgan (not her real name) is on a field trip with 45 third-grade students. They’re going into the big city for a “Day in the City” experience. They’re going to the downtown mall. They will walk to the art museum. They will ride the light rail. They will walk on sidewalks and obey traffic signs. They will have a buddy at all times. What could possibly go wrong?

Fortunately, she is not alone. Another teacher is with her, as well as one teacher’s aide and two parents. But Mrs. Morgan is not happy.

See Mrs. Morgan run. See Mrs. Morgan tapping on her cell phone. See her talking to the policeman. See Mrs. Morgan’s vision of losing her job. What’s wrong?

Could be any number of things. Perhaps little Rosie upchucked on the bus as they drove down some winding roads from the foothills. Could be that little Junior’s sack lunch went missing. Maybe Moira and Ruby had a bathroom emergency. But the truth is, it’s worse.

A child is missing. After three head counts, it is confirmed. One kid is AWOL, and now Mrs. Morgan needs to determine the missing child’s name.

Think of Psalm 23 as a sort of field trip. But instead of a teacher, the leader of this field trip is called “My Shepherd.” The 45 third-graders are sheep. We are the sheep. And the shepherd, being a good shepherd, knows that anything and everything might go wrong.

Some of the sheep will get sick. Others will wander off if not monitored carefully. Some will bleat like crazy because they sense a predator nearby. Some will do something stupid and deliberately avoid the shepherd. According to Isaiah 53:6, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.”

Here’s the thing: when a shepherd leads the sheep from the holding pen, or the “fold,” he is officially on a field trip. Research is inconclusive as to whether a third-grade teacher with 45 8-year-olds or a shepherd with 45 sheep has the harder job. On this field trip, the shepherd will need to (1) feed the flock, (2) provide nap time, (3) lead them carefully when passing through narrow and dangerous areas, (4) open up the first aid kit as needed, (5) feed them again and finally, (6) lead them home. In other words, the shepherd is provider, protector, healer and host.

The Provider

The psalmist describes his situation as being without “want” or as lacking nothing. These opening words of this well-known psalm are often recited without

comprehending the astonishing assertion. Lacking nothing? Isn't there something that perhaps the Lord and Shepherd has missed, forgotten or neglected?

Yet David insists that he is lacking nothing when the Lord is his shepherd.

We must take his word for it, but one has to wonder if other biblical figures feel as David did. Think of Elijah, who was chased into the wilderness by Queen Jezebel and paused under a broom tree to complain that he alone in all Israel remained faithful to God: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:10). Did Elijah think that he was lacking nothing?

Or think of the post-Egypt Israelites freed from bondage in Egypt. Now they are in the wilderness, and stayed there for 40 years. Did they believe they were lacking in nothing?

Perhaps not. But God once reminded them that although they'd not crossed the Jordan into the promised land, they were indeed lacking nothing: "Surely the Lord your God has blessed you in all your undertakings; he knows you're going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing" (Deuteronomy 2:7).

Or think of the women and men of faith over the past two millennia who have suffered for the faith — people whom every reasonable observer would say had lacked many things. Yet, as the writer of Hebrews notes, these people, past and present, filter their experiences through faith — the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

Sometimes, our situation might be analogous to the kids on a field trip. No doubt at times they might feel that they're bored, suffering, pushed to their limits or deprived. The reality is that Mrs. Morgan is taking care of them perfectly, providing everything the children need, even if they don't think so.

Notice the verb in verse 2: "He makes me lie down in green pastures." Sounds like an 8-year-old talking about his trip leader.

"She made me walk single file."

"She made me take a rest."

"She made me stay with my buddy."

"She made me be quiet."

We're not children. We are mature believers who understand that it is hard to take the long view, that only God truly knows what we need for the present moment. That's why, when we follow Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we do so as an act of faith. We know that we are taken care of and will be provided with everything that we need for our well-being. The shepherd, David says, "He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths" (vv. 2-3).

The Good Shepherd provides.

The Protector

Sheep prefer sun to shadows. But sometimes, the shepherd has to lead the sheep through dark places and deep valleys where the shadows are long and dark.

Often, the way seems dangerous and foreboding. It is not unusual in some states in the West (like Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and Utah) to come across a

shepherd who is leading the flock down a state or county highway in order to get the flock to a different pasture. Cars and trucks have to wait until the shepherd gets them off the road.

Mrs. Morgan certainly had this same task. On more than one occasion, she and her teacher aides had to lead their flock of 45 kids across streets and intersections. Cars waited. Trucks came to a halt. Crossing took place only in designated areas and when the traffic lights were green. The children were perhaps unaware of all that their teacher was doing for them. But she protected them from harm. She stayed alert for potential dangers. She was always thinking, “What can possibly go wrong?” And when she had answered that question, she made the appropriate adjustments.

This kind of attention might evoke love and appreciation. In David’s case, the pronoun changes. He had been referring to the shepherd in the third person — describing what “my” shepherd does. But now, he switches to second person. In other words, he addresses the shepherd directly: “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” (vv. 4-5, emphasis added).

David realizes that something special is happening. So, he turns to the Shepherd and his words reveal a sense of amazement and appreciation. “I know what you’re doing. You are taking care of me; you’re protecting me, and I am very grateful.”

Of course, it’s not always green pastures and still waters. It’s not always a rose garden, and the path is not always, if ever, strewn and scented with rose pedals. Sometimes, the valleys and dark paths are necessary. And the shepherd cannot make predators go away.

But David recognizes that in the midst of the valley, while walking dark pathways, while surrounded by predators, the Shepherd is right there!

The Healer

It might seem odd, but sheep stumble. They run into things. One expert, testifying to a Senate sub-committee, called it “ovine ineptitude.”

Kids do that, too. They trip. They run into each other. They bump into brick walls and break their noses. There has never been a field trip in the history of field trips without some incident or accident.

Of course, Mrs. Morgan and her aides are prepared. And so is the Good Shepherd. Speaking directly to the Shepherd, David says, “You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (v. 5). This is no doubt a reference to the custom of anointing the heads of favored guests at a lavish banquet or dinner with oil. But in the context of a shepherd with his sheep, it makes perfect sense to recall that shepherds were not only guards, dieticians, pathfinders and traffic police officers, but also doctors and nurses. In Psalm 147, the writer says, “He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds” (v. 4). A shepherd had to have a knowledge of medicine. He had to know how to treat the most common sheep injuries. A shepherd knew what to do when the sheep had injured themselves, or had been wounded by a predator.

Our injuries may be of the body, soul or spirit. Our suffering might be physical, or it might be psychological. We could be brokenhearted, or simply

broken. We might be at loose ends, or not know which end is up.

The shepherd knows how to heal wounds, where to pour the oil. The shepherd knows where it hurts.

The Host

The shepherd leads the sheep home, where the shepherd acts as a sort of host. The one who is shepherd at the beginning of this psalm is the Lord dwelling in a house at the end of the psalm. David has already alluded to the Shepherd as a host with his references to a table that is prepared and the anointing of oil — a scene that has Eucharistic overtones.

But now, David reminds us that the shepherd is always aware that he must get the flock to a safe place by nightfall. He leads them to the fold. He takes them to a safe place.

David uses this as a metaphor for our eternal home, when we are led at last to the “house of the Lord,” where we shall spend eternity. The Bible says that there, in this eternal home, “they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:16-17).

Whatever perils we may face in this life, we can live confidently, knowing that the Good Shepherd will faithfully lead us to our eternal home.

This, you remember, was Mrs. Morgan’s concern. She was missing a student. Of the many things she was charged with doing, returning the children safely to their home at the end of the day was one of them, perhaps the most important responsibility of all.

After some frantic investigation, she found out what happened. A parent had met the group downtown, and then, inexplicably, the parent left the group taking his child with him. He and the child returned home without notifying the group leaders. So, Mrs. Morgan was missing a child.

Of course, how a parent could simply show up and walk off with a child was a matter of grave concern, but it was also incredible that a parent would not have the good sense to let someone know what was going on.

The Good Shepherd, however, will not lose track of us. David writes, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (v. 6). Although beady-eyed predators may follow a flock, waiting for an opportunity to strike, David says that in his case, “goodness and mercy” follow him, not predators — from whom in any case he is protected.

Then he adds, “and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (NIV). The implication is that he will experience the presence of the Shepherd throughout his entire life and on into eternity — all in all, a rather good field trip for the sheep of God’s pasture!

Closing Hymn: “The King of Love My Shepherd Is”

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been, Thou forever wilt be

(Refrain)

Great is Thy faithfulness, Great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me

Summer and winter, springtime and harvest
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Benediction:

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Postlude: Prelude and Fugue in E Minor “The Cathedral” JS Bach

PRAYER LIST

Jacob Allen - Deployed/Middle East

Janet Aveyard

Amy Belli

Carolyn Barney

Jack Brigham

Becky Colwell

Maureen Daoust

David Dufour

Diana Escarbie

Robert Fitton

Keeley Folan

Cathy Fontaine

Bob and Pat Goguen

Linda Haas

Douglas Hanks

John Hanks, Jr.

Timothy Hoffman

Linda Hurd

Tom Kazanjian

Sarah Kee

Colin Lajoie

Bob and Doris Lane

Diane Lane Cormier

Linda Long

Sue Mattison

Lorraine Michaud

Audrey Painchaud

Maria Piazza

Melanie Pouliot

Del Sampson

Elwin Shepard

Amanda Sicard

Ron Smith

The Family of Diane Staples

Carole Ann Sumner and Henry

Donna Thorne

Daniel Tousignant

Marilyn Wales

Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed