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February 24, 2008
'The LORD is My Shepherd: 'A Guide God''
Rev. Jim Wood

A child read the 23rd Psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

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; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Thank you. Our New Testament lesson this morning as we in this season of Lent are focusing on the 23rd Psalm in the Old Testament and looking at passages that are reflective of it in the New, is found in the 9th chapter of the Gospel of Luke beginning with the 57th verse. This is a passage that speaks of Jesus' interaction with what appear to be three different potential followers of Christ. The setting is significant because at this place in the Gospel of Luke Jesus has now turned toward Jerusalem and is in the journey toward Jerusalem and toward those fateful events that are to come. As this turn has occurred we are still at the very beginning of the turn, we realize that Jesus is giving the disciples the opportunity to understand what the call of discipleship really is, how serious, how difficult and how challenging the call is. He's preparing them as they seek to speak to Him about just blindly following because it is not something that can come that easily. It's a focus for us not only today but it really is a focus for us in the life of the church - what is it to know the "cost of discipleship" as Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹ so famously puts it. What does it require of us to be disciples of Christ and what is that He asks of us and how is it that we as a Body, as the family of God, prepare ourselves and keep ourselves turned toward that call?

Part of doing that is the reason why we have a Leadership Luncheon, for example, coming up on March 3rd, an opportunity for us to reflect on what is the call of leadership and what are the non-negotiables in leadership in the world, in the secular aspects of my life as it relates to my Christian life. I would encourage you to take advantage of that. It's coming up a week from Monday - two great speakers, Debbie Major and Mike Smack. Debbie is a professor at Old Dominion in psychology and Mike Smack is a Navy Captain who works in leadership development with the Navy in some real top levels. Both are members of our congregation. There is information in *Access* about it. You can sign up with the bulletin tear off and put it in the offering plate. That's an easy thing for you to do.

It's also why we on Wednesday nights in our Institute of Discipleship try to focus on how the Christian life is lived out in the world. This coming Wednesday night, for example, we've got great programming for our children; Valena is continuing with the K through 2 class working on Faith in Arts with a parent. It's a great opportunity. There were 20 some people in the class last week – it was great. Our Adult class is focusing on sexuality from a Christian perspective and particularly what the Bible says about sex. I thought about making it multi-media but decided against that, so we'll just be talking about it this week (I thought that was actually more humorous than you did (laughter)). I encourage you to take advantage of that. The information is in *Access* and the bulletin. You can sign up for that as well.

Listen for the word of our Lord.

New Testament Reading – Luke 9:57-62

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home."

Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

In August of 1991 I was privileged to be in what was then the Soviet Union in the time that the coup occurred and Gorbachev was removed. I was not there when he actually stood on the tanks but rode past where Boris Yeltsin stood on the tanks there near Red Square. It was a tumultuous time for Russia. I was there with a mission group. We were spending a month there. Many things happened in that experience. It was very, very formative for me, but the one that I remember the most ironically is a story of hospitality. We were a group of about 20 Christians from around the US and they would divide us up and we would go to a community and we would

stay with local families. This was a time when it was a very, very sparse living for the Russians – very, very sparse and yet they had within their culture and within their hearts a great desire to share the gift of hospitality. Whatever you received when you were with them was the best. Very often we would stay in what we would call “projects,” huge apartment buildings that were built by the Soviet government where you would have perhaps families of two or three children in one bedroom, and always we would receive the one bed in the house and everyone else would sleep on the floor. The food was the best they had.

One particular morning I was having breakfast with a family I was staying with by myself and they had a tray, the best china that they had, and on the tray was this golden concoction. I assumed it was marmalade, and I like marmalade, so I took a good hunk of it and put it on a cracker that they had on my plate. As I took the first bite I realized that it was not marmalade. It was a golden caviar. I tell you, I’ve learned in ministry to eat a lot of things and I’ve eaten a lot of things around the world, but I could not that morning on an empty stomach get that down for the life of me. I realized that it was the best that the family had to offer and so I’m kind of stuck. “What do I do?” We were eating in their kitchen in this very small little apartment, when I realized that their attention was turned and they were turned back toward the stove to get something else for food, I took the cracker with the caviar and I just stuck it in my pocket real fast with the idea that I would then sneak into the bathroom and be able to just take it out and be able to dispose of it. Well, it worked really well until I got in to the bathroom and tried to pull it out and get all of the caviar without getting it on my shirt (laughter). It kind of smeared in there. I got away with it with the family. Nobody noticed, nobody said anything even though I’m sure they wondered why the American came out with a wet shirt on one side.

We went to church and it was a long Orthodox service. It was a feast day. It was like a five-hour worship service, no chairs, no seats, no pews – you stand up for the whole time. It was packed, slam packed, in this church. There were literally thousands of people just slammed in it and as we were all slammed in there after a couple of hours it started to heat up and get rather warm, and as it did the smell of the caviar that I had never been able to quite get out of my shirt began to kind of build. The olfactory senses of others started to be impacted by it, and it became sort of this “miracle of the American,” because everybody was just jam packed except around me, there was about a five foot radius where nobody was standing (laughter). The very first sentence that I learned how to translate in Russian outside of a guidebook, you know sort of the where can I find the local this and that, was the sentence that went basically like this as people would say, “The Communists were right about one thing. The Americans do smell like spoiled caviar.” It was horribly embarrassing and it stayed with me literally on that trip for the next three weeks. I only had two shirts – we were traveling light and no matter how many times I washed that shirt I could never get the smell of that spoiled caviar out.

I think about that story more than almost any other in that incredible experience in Russia. One of the reasons I think about it is that I read somewhere, I think, I’ve forgotten exactly where I read it, but I read that the smell is the strongest memory sense that we have. Of all of the senses we have the smell is the one that is the strongest to the memory. It’s also a story that I’ve carried with me because it was a true story that really embarrassed me for almost the whole time I was there. I was literally joked and introduced to groups as “the American that smells like spoiled caviar.” It was something that was very difficult at the time as it went on just to have to keep hearing and dealing with, and yet at the same time if I had to do it over it I’d do the exact same thing. I don’t think I could ever have turned down something offered to a guest that was so generous for them. Doing it that way, knowing I couldn’t stomach it and at least being able to accept it - of all of my sins and all of the things that I’ve fallen short of - it’s something I’ve remembered in my mind of doing the right thing.

Doing the right thing doesn't always smell good and it doesn't smell good to people around us. What I mean by that is that when you do the right thing it's very often misunderstood by those around us in the culture, in the culture that speaks about our own self-empowerment and our own self-actualization, very often it stands in distinction – in contra-distinction – to that culture, to the way we look at things normally. Yet, doing the right thing is really what the core of life is about in relationship with Jesus Christ.

In Psalm 23 the sheep are dealing with all kind of smells around them. Today we are focusing on that passage that says in the New Revised Standard “He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.” They deal with all kinds of smells. Sheep are not the smartest animals in the world. They can become so distracted that they literally can eat themselves off of cliffs to their deaths. They are not the smartest animals and I think it's really interesting and powerful that we often like to compare ourselves to sheep. At least that's one thing that we get right when we start to look at our lives; we are not as smart as we would like to be either. The sheep really become reliant on the shepherd. They become reliant on the shepherd because the shepherd is the one who has the mind, the shepherd is the one who can see, the shepherd is the one who knows and so they follow him in faithfulness. They follow him in a way that makes their lives safe and secure.

They have trust in him and in particular as they are going in the right paths – the truest Hebrew translation is what the New Revised has “the right paths” – when they follow in the right paths the paths don't always make sense. They are very often serpentine. They are very often movements that the shepherd will take the sheep on a path that the path wouldn't even think about going because he knows that's the closest way to get water or he knows that's it's the safest route. In that wandering and in that walking the sheep really form a queue like the Brits do; they follow very often in line. As they do that there's a priority even within the sheep that the shepherd sets. You'll see that the sheep that have the most trust in the shepherd are the ones that are in eyesight of the shepherd so that the other sheep can follow them. There's this priority, this ordering, even in the sheep community so that they can stay safe and protected and guarded and on the right path. Why do they need that so much? Because sheep get distracted. Sheep follow the smells of whatever is the nearest grass whether it is the best grass or not. They follow the smells of things that can distract them and lead them astray.

When David says that the “Lord is my shepherd” and he begins to speak about him leading him “in the right paths for his name's sake,” David is very, very seriously reflecting on what it is to be one of those sort of dim-witted animals who must follow in trust. But what about us? We want to follow. We want to be able to do the right things. We want to follow on the right paths, but how do we do that? How do we live our lives doing the right thing when all of the world seems to confuse us about what it is? In fact, isn't it true for us in our lives that one of the issues that we wrestle with so very often is “is this the right thing?” Not “do I want to do the right thing but in this situation is this the right thing for me to do? What decision do I need to make? How do I need to respond in this way? Is this the right thing for me to do?”

I had this imprinted, this confusing notion of what the right thing is, imprinted on my mind when I was about five years old. My father was a long distance truck driver. He came home late one night with my oldest brother who had been driving with him. They had been out for several weeks. My father immediately went to his room after he greeted us. My brother after a time of just catching his senses began to tell something that had just happened to them on the way back home. I was about five years old and was in a place in the room where very often kids are forgotten and get to hear adult conversation. My oldest brother and my father were coming back late one night through a small little town and they came upon a recent wreck of an old farm truck that had flipped over. In the farm truck was a farmer. He was trapped inside the truck. He

couldn't get out and the truck was smoldering. It was very clear that the truck had caught fire and was going to continue to burn and at some point was going to explode. Here this farmer caught in the truck is screaming and begging for help and they pull and they yank and they pull and they yank and they can do nothing to extract him. Up comes a very, very young sheriff's deputy from a small little town and as he comes up the farmer pleads with him to pull out his service revolver and end the pain for him. Then he pleads and begs for that young deputy if he wouldn't do it himself to hand him his revolver. The young deputy became so frightened and so afraid that he took his revolver out of his holster and he laid it at the feet of my father and he turned around and walked back and got into the sheriff's vehicle.

Life is not always black and white. Things are not always so clear. If they are for you, I'm proud of you – but I think you're wrong. Life is gray so very often and knowing the right thing to do in the right situation is one of the greatest challenges that we face as Christians no matter how we matter how we grow in our Christian maturity. It's in those confusing moments when we have to make decisions or we are forced to respond in some way – even when our refusal to respond becomes a response – that we are tested in our righteousness, that we are tested in our trust, that we are testing in knowing who we are and whose we are. How do we do this? How do we become the people that in the gray of life learn what is right for us at that moment.

I think there are two clues in our text today. The first comes in Luke. I think they are clues of smell in all honesty because I think they are hard to define. I think they are hard to specify and yet they permeate the whole text. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus has turned back to go towards Jerusalem, towards His death and people want to follow Him because He is at the height of His fame. He's at the height of acclaim in life. People are proud of Him, they're excited. They're with Him because of all that He's done and because of all of His power and because of all that He has demonstrated, but now He's turning back to go to Jerusalem and He knows what that entails. He knows that it entails a cost in His discipleship that will result even in the giving of His own life. As He goes people say, "Lord, I'll follow you. Lord, I'll be with you. Lord, I'll be with you." In this case three "tourists" who are with Him at the time say, "Lord, I'll go back," and Jesus responds to all three. "I have as the Son of Man not even a place to lay my head." "Let the dead bury the dead." "Don't go back and say 'goodbye' or 'farewell' to your family. Come because anyone who turns their head back from the plow will not make a straight path, a right path to go with me."

Those last two are particularly interesting because burying the dead for the Jew is a hugely significant required event – still is to this day. The timing of it, when it has to be done, the way it has to be done, is critical to the essence of being in family and as Jesus says, "Let the dead bury the dead," can you imagine the offense that He is giving to the people who are there hearing that? He's standing against the traditions of the family. He's standing against the traditions of their heritage. Then the other says, "Lord, I'll come with you, just let me go and say farewell to my family, just let me say goodbye, let me put my affairs in order" and Jesus says to him, "No. You cannot even do that." It is amazing what Jesus is doing. He is making it so very difficult to follow and He is saying simply this, "You cannot come with me unless your discipleship is unconditional. If you come with me you will stand against almost everything that you ever thought mattered before."

I'm going to mention two books today that I think are in my top 10 of all books ever read in my life. *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer² is seminal in my understanding of what the Gospel of Christ is. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says as he opens that powerful book "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come die." He says that the cost is total, unconditional trust and belief in Christ and without this unconditional trust in following Christ you will never know what it is to

stay on the right path. The second clue in this comes in the 23rd Psalm, “He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” I love that it ends, “... for his name’s sake,” because this is critical to being righteous as well. This is critical to being on the right path. It’s not simply being on the right path for my benefit. It’s not just being on the right path so that I’ll be taken care of, but it is being on the right path for His name’s sake. To do something that is right is to do it not because I think it is right but because my discipleship, my following of Christ makes it right, because it’s done for the namesake of my God. It’s done because He has asked me to do it. It’s done because He places me in that situation at that moment. If I live my life knowing that what I do is for the namesake of God, for something that is bigger than myself, for something that is more glorious that is something that is so much better than I, then my life starts to take its righteous steps.

There’s a new book that’s out that I’ve been finding intriguing. It’s called *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape our Decisions*. It’s by a man named Dan Ariely³ who teaches at MIT. He’s gone through and he’s looked at the decisions that we make that are totally irrational and yet we almost overwhelmingly always make them. For example, any time you order something online and you’re offered free shipping if you buy one more thing and you start to price that out and you look at the cost and all, it’s amazing. It’s never to your benefit to take advantage of that free shipping if you’ve got to go and find something else to buy out of the catalog, but you know overwhelmingly we do it because the idea of having something free, whether it’s rational or not, overwhelms us and we can’t turn it down. We have to accept it. The man that wrote this book from MIT, a professor at MIT that studied all of this admits that he bought about a \$50,000 Lexus last year because they told him that he would have free oil changes for two years if he bought it. We just do things that are not always rational.

One of the things that he talks about in this book is one that amazes me. They did a study with people doing just general tasks, just duties, to help someone else. One of them was helping someone move a sofa. The other was helping someone do some very menial computer data entry, just basic little simple tasks to help someone. They began to pay people to do it. As they began to pay them as time went on they began to offer them less for it. For example, they might pay someone \$10.00 to move a sofa but after a while they only offered them \$5.00 to do it. It was amazing that it was something that people, as they were paid less for a very very basic task, even though they were still being very well paid for just the two minutes of help that was needed, they became less interested in it and they began to refuse and even in the tasks that they were still doing they were less dedicated to it. They made more mistakes in the data entry, they did all of that. Here’s the thing that got so intriguing. When they reached the point in the study where they said “Now, we are not even going to pay you at all but we want you to do it so you can help this person” do you know what people did? They worked even harder than when they were getting paid top dollar. They did it to help someone better than when they were being paid extravagantly for it. That’s totally irrational from a mathematical standpoint I suppose, but it makes perfect sense to me from a Gospel standpoint.

You see within us is this desire to do the right thing. What’s in us is a desire to be good person, to follow the right path, to do something to help someone, to have some meaning in my life that means I did something for someone else. We want to. This is the kind of people that we want to be only we get it confused because the world wants to pay or because the world’s standards or these other things creep in and they distract us from our very purpose. Doing right just because it’s right is what you and I want to be and the way we do that is by knowing, by keeping focused in our lives that what I’m doing is not for the pay, not for the compensation, not for the reward, but I’m doing it simply because there is something bigger than me. Helping someone else, living for something bigger.

I have a lot of heroes and a lot of them in this congregation. One I was talking with the other day is a real hero for me. He's a retired member of our congregation; he was at the top of his field, a very professional job. He excelled, he did incredibly well in his profession, and was considered to be an incredibly honorable person in his profession. He has had some health issues where things have just gone miraculously for him. He's growing in his faith. He's retired now. Just as he retires his wife develops a severe and growing dementia and all of the things that you and I have all thought about that when I retire this is what we're going to do – all of that just stopped. All of those dreams and all of those thoughts – This is my time. I've done this. I've lived for other people. It all stopped with that. Here's a man who now instead of being able to live as we want to say a golden retirement is living day to day caring for someone that he so greatly loves, and yet it is almost as if everything else in life has almost had to stop. It's an amazing thing.

As I look at the world I see so many men who just view their relationships, their marriages, their families, their children as disposable things that they can walk away from at any time and I look at all of the options that the world has and all of the places that we can put people away. All of the things that we can do to forget about and to be told in the context of that world, "This is the right thing. This is the good thing. This is best for you. This is best for her." Here is someone who is giving of his life and he's a hero for me. I told him the other day, "You know you're a real hero for me and I mean that. His response was, "I'm not a hero." He basically said to me "I'm not a hero. All I'm doing is every day trying to follow the Lord," and that made him an even greater hero.

Another book in the top 10. If you have not read these two, I tell you, you are not in my top 10 (laughter). Viktor Frankl⁴ was a Holocaust survivor. Viktor Frankl had the worst experience anyone could have.

(Missing section in tape)

When I was five years old in that little corner of the room where they forgot that a kid was my brother reached the point in the story where the young police officer scared to death didn't know what to do and he pulls his revolver and he lays it at my father's feet and goes back and puts his head on the steering wheel and doesn't look. My brother never finished that story. That's where he stopped. I learned two things that night when I was five years old in the corner of the room. I learned that sometimes stories are best unfinished at least for a while. I also learned that righteousness is a great thing, but it is so hard to know. Before my brother died ten or twelve years ago I went to him and said, "Carl, you've got to finish the story. What did our Dad do?" His eyes, almost as if the fire was back in there creating a mist came to him and he just sat quietly for a moment and then he finished, he finished the story. He said, "Our Dad did the right thing."

You and I want the same righteousness in our lives and only you know; only you know where you are in your life today. Only you know what you're being tempted with. Only you know what's being placed before you – the choices and the decisions. Only you know where the gray is in your life. Be righteous. Do the right thing. The way you'll know is if you do it for His name's sake and nothing else, no matter what cost, no matter what price.

Amen.

Sermon Dictionary Notes:

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich – German pastor, theologian, and participant in the German resistance against Hitler who was killed just before the end of World War II. Author of *The Cost of Discipleship*.

² Bonhoeffer, Dietrich – quote “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come die.”

³ Ariely, Dan – Professor of Behavioral Economics at MIT, holding two PhD’s, one in Business Administration and one in Cognitive Psychology. Author of numerous papers and articles and *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape our Decisions*

⁴ Frankl, Viktor – Medical doctor and philosopher who was a survivor of the Holocaust. Works include *The Doctor and the Soul* and *Man’s Search for Meaning*