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March 9, 2008

**“The Lord Is My Shepherd: In the Right Hands”**

Rev. Jim Wood

A child read the 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.*

*The rod is a worm stick or club. It is used by shepherds to manage, and protect and correct their sheep. It symbolizes authority, power and comfort.*

*The staff is a long slender stick with a crooked end. It is used by shepherds to guide, rescue and lead their sheep. It symbolizes protection, guidance and comfort.*

What a great gift it is to have our children in this season of Lent as we're reflecting on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. To have our children memorizing it, what a very powerful thing. Our New Testament lesson this morning is in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John. It can be found in the New Testament section towards the back part of the bible. Now this is coming out of the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John is very different than the first three of the synoptics. In the first three, Jesus doesn't self disclose, not readily. In the Gospel of John, the language is different. It's much more symbolic, much more majestic, much more mystical in a very, very powerful way. And so we find all the "I am" statements, all the times that Jesus says, "I am", we find in the Gospel of John. And in this particular passage today, we're going to hear one where Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." Now the Good Shepherd is a notion that is saying two things, Jesus is communicating two things as he says that. The first is, is he's drawing to himself the notion of kingship. Because kings, not only our Hebrew

ancestors, but other nationalities, other people very often called their kings shepherds or the kings called themselves shepherds as well. But what you'll notice that's so interesting in this passage, is rather than Jesus claiming that kingship and focusing on that, instead this really focuses much more on the role of the shepherd with his sheep out in the pasture. Much more humbling, much more of an understanding of that kind of intimacy in relationship of a shepherd and a sheep, rather than just a kingship. And this is the heart of who Christ is.

So listen for the word of our Lord again.

Old Testament Reading – John 10:1-11

*Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.*

*The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.*

*The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice.*

*He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*

*When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.*

*They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.'*

*Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

*So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.*

*All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.*

*I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.*

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

I am so very, very happy to see our children memorizing the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm on Wednesday nights. It's a powerful thing for me and I come from the old school, where I think memory work has great value. I think it stays with us in ways that when we're put through the ropes of doing it we might not grasp; but in particular as I look at scripture. And the thing that strikes me so much is that the real power in

being able to memorize pieces of scripture, particularly passages like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, is that it's not so much that we memorize it, but really as time goes on that scripture starts to memorize us. What I mean by that is that scripture starts to take on its own life in us. And it's almost like instead of saying, "Oh, I've got this memorized, and this is for me at the moment, this is my thing I've got." It's almost as if we are given the privilege of being drawn in to the mystery and the majesty of the scripture itself. That we're carried into its life, other than carrying it into ours. And we're given this real privilege of being memorized, being known to our core, by scripture itself. Now these passages today, as we look at the good shepherd passage in John. And we look at our focus today on, "Your rod and Your staff they comfort me." Both of those are passages that give us that privilege, there again, of having our lives, our stories, interpreted by it. When I think of shepherding, I'm drawn back to our time in Africa and every time I'm back I like to, when I have the chance, on Saturday mornings to go to Limuru, which is a town about 15-20 Km away from Nazareth Hospital in Kenya. I'm given the opportunity, usually on Saturday mornings to have a little down time, and I often go to the goat market. And the goat market is this amazing place in this little African village. It's a big pasture that's usually empty throughout the week. But on Saturday morning it's a goat market and they call sheep, goats there too. Goat is the word that they use, they like that phrase, but it's mostly sheep that are out there. You can have just a great time. A lot of women come and they set up little coal fires in the middle of the pasture and they sell tea and a couple of biscuits that they made. All these different people, the massai come from the Riff valley, and they come and they bring their sheep that they've walked literally hundreds of kilometers, and raised to get there. It's just a sweet time. It's becoming kind of a big business. There is hundreds, sometimes close to a thousand sheep there, particularly if it's right before a holiday, when they're real popular. So businesslike has it become, that they've even started to have brokers there. These African guys who actually buy a flock, or who will represent the owner and the flock, and sort of broker for you. Now, when I go, unless I bring somebody with me, I'm the only white face that's there at all. So I stand out. And I'm kind of seen as an easy mark. Even though they don't know that I've been trained in goatology. I know more about goats and sheep than these brokers do. But the brokers are usually the ones that are aggressive and they come up to me. So I finally learned after a couple times, I'd say to them, "Well, are these really your sheep?" "Yeah, yeah, yeah, these are my sheep. I walked all this distance for my sheep." I said, "Ok, ok, well how about this," and I walk off a little bit with them and I say, "How about call those sheep over here." He says, "What?" I say, "Call those sheep, tell the to come over here." Then they look at me and they say, "You know about sheep don't you?" And I say, "Yeah, sheep don't go to a broker, sheep go to a shepherd." They know the shepherd's voice.

There have been studies done on this with moms and babies. Moms know their own babies cry, even though there might be 20 babies crying at the same time. It's actually been kind of interesting. They've done some of this with adoptive parents as well, and moms seem to have the same instinct for their own babies cry. Well, sheep are in a sense like that, they know the one shepherd. All the other shepherds,

all the other brokers can call them, and they're not going to pay a bit of attention. But they hear their shepherd's voice, and they come immediately. That's a powerful notion for me. I just find that so very powerful as I reflect on life and what life is and all the different calls, and all the different people that are vying for our attention and vying for our energy and our passion. But it's the one shepherd's voice that we know and can hear.

The other thing that was really amazing that happened one Saturday while I was there, and I was telling our staff in worship on Tuesday. This is literally a rod; it's a massai war implement in all honesty. It is used, and it can be, you can throw it, if you're trained as the massai are. You can throw it 40-50 yards right on the button. I mean it is incredible to see what they do with it. It can totally kill a lion with one throw, if it's thrown right. It can defeat enemies it's what a rod is. And the shepherds, the massai, keep one in their belt, and they keep their staff, which is usually a very flexible type of smaller stick. And they walk with them all the time. And anytime they need to use it, they're ready. Now, this one Saturday morning, out there with all the sheep, there were two dogs out there that were kind of wild dogs. They weren't like wild safari dogs, but they were wild dogs, nobody owned them. And they got two sheep off to the side, and then they narrowed that down to one sheep that they thought was vulnerable. And the one dog, literally, they started biting him and pulling him down, and one dog got up on the back of his neck. As soon as he did that, the shepherd, the massai, who's sheep it was, pulled out and he threw this thing over my head, and over 40 or 50 other people, and just totally nailed that dog. That dog was never ever able to hurt another goat, eternally, if you get my point.

Not only do I know about goats, but I'm actually trained in this. And so I thought I'd do a demonstration. Gayle stand up and hold your hands up and just frame them just like this. No move away from the glass a little bit, yeah there we go. Ok that's good. Now, just stay like that. Everyone keep your heads down just incase something happens, let me get my jacket off. Get ready. Ok, I don't want to hurt anybody, but I really, we've been practicing this so. Ok everybody put your head down and close your eyes, because I don't want to hit your eyes with it or anything. Head down, close your eyes. Keep your eyes closed, I'll tell you when to open them. Ok, there look back! Isn't that amazing!? I thought it was really great! Sometimes guys just want to have fun.

Now, here's the thing though. This literally will fell a lion. But there is another use that the shepherds have for it. And they use it more regularly in the other way. The sheep know that this is an implement that can protect them. They've seen it used against their predators. But they also know what it feels like. Because they get it a lot. When they get off the path, when they need to be corrected, when they need to be going straight again, they get it. Some sheep get it a little bit harder, usually the men. Men sheep are like human men. Male sheep are kind of thick headed. So they get it a little bit harder than the female sheep. And it's used as a correction, just as the staff is, and very often I've seen the massai, I've seen the shepherds really whack

those sheep. The sheep that needed it, the sheep that were getting in trouble, the sheep that were getting too close to the cliff or too close to danger. Now this is the part of the shepherd that we don't talk much about. Particularly in the main line. We kind of leave this to others and we avoid it. What we do is we focus on God and love. And we become so focused on the idea that God is love that it becomes very frightening for us to even think that God might do the same thing to us. He might correct us sometimes. He might bring some pain in our life in order to set us right. And so we say well if God's love then he'd never do anything to hurt us. And what we do in that is we cheat the love of God. Because if you're a parent, or if you've been parented, you certainly know that correction is essential to love. So we kind of walk around and have this image of God as love, but we cheat what God's love is. It becomes something that's hollow and kind of flaccid to me, it doesn't have any power to stand up on its own. We lose it. And this is what we have to do, particularly for us, particularly in our own lives is to ask the question, "and Are there times when God corrects me in ways that really hurt? And corrects me with the kind of things that can literally destroy. But he uses them for a different purpose. And how do I know when that pain is of God? When that potential broken relationship or that illness that might come to me. Or that sense of betrayal might come, or the pain of another person. How do I know that in that setting God is using that in a sense..." You know I love; one of my favorite old hymns is one that we hardly ever sing except at Thanksgiving, "We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing..." It says, "He hastens and chastens His will to make known." And this is the truth. This God of ours who hastens us, who moves us along, who loves us into His grace, is also the God who loves us enough to chasten us, to hold us accountable to ourselves. Not because we need to be accountable, not because God's weakened by our failure, but because He knows by his love He can lead us in those right paths.

So how do we do that? How do we know it? Well, we listen to people's stories, and sometimes that helps us. I've got to be honest with you; I'm not a big fan on memorized testimonies. I'm not trying to say anything really bad about it, but I'm just saying I'm not a real fan of it. Because what I start to find with people who very often have kind of standard testimony. Maybe they travel around, and go from church to church. Or at every gathering, they're the person to give their testimony. And if you hear the testimony one, two, or three times, you kind of say it yourself. It all sounds the same, they use the same language, and they tell it the same way. And it's all very memorized. And I'm not trying to say it's no real. But for me, it sometimes loses its power. And I've got to be honest, almost always those testimonies, if you go on a youth retreat, and they give a testimony, it's always going to involve somebody who's don something really bad. Like sex, drugs, all those kinds of things. That's all the kids are hearing. But they are making a testimony about how God saved them from it. And how God brought this pain into their life. How God used his rod to correct them and how He set them right. And that's meaningful, but I think there is another way, that at least for me is a better way. I thin the real testimonies of life, at least for me, as I look at the people who have been a living testimony, are people who are simply that. Who are not so anxious to share a testimony, they live it. And they are the kind of people that are not

autobiographical, but they are biographical. You have to get in there and really ask them, "Tell me about your life. Tell me your story. Tell me about what's going on, I see something in your life and I want to know what that is. I want to understand that, I want to grasp it." We as a congregation talk very often about being a congregation that is incarnational and transformational. And when people first hear that phrase they think, "Oh Lord, I don't have any idea what that means. Can you define it for me, can you make it a lot more clear, level it out for me?" Well, no I really can't. Because to be incarnational and transformational is more a living witness than it is a word or a formula, or a phrase. To be incarnational is to truly believe that in the heart of God, God calls us to be the church which is the body of Christ and in that sense, when we are part of the body of Christ, we all start to become Christ Himself. Now, that's not a heresy, that's good solid theology. I'm not saying that we are like the Buddhist that ultimately just assume all of the God within us. But God gives us, through His Holy Spirit; He gives us the opportunity, the privilege of being the hands and the feet. It's incarnational, it's Christ through us. As I look at people's lives, I see people touched by Christ through the lives of others. And through that witness in powerful ways, that's incarnational. And transformational is simply to say that I don't have to just be given a set of rules and conform to the rules, but I'm literally given the opportunity to have my life transformed. In Romans, the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter when Paul says, "Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." He uses the word conformed, schema, schematic. But when he uses the word transformed, he uses the word, metamorphosis. It's to literally, like a butterfly, to take on a whole new life. And this is what transformation is, and this is what we believe, in this congregation, is not only possible, but we believe this is what God has in store for every single person who wants to receive it. It's not just a set of rules, but a new life. And a way to have a transformed living. And when that transformed living comes, we literally start to see the Christ in each other, and we start to live in witness. Now, we're still broken, we're still sinful; we still can hurt each other. But there is something about the gift of God's grace that works through that way. And you see how it's kind of mushy when you start to define it. But when you start to experience it, it just overwhelms. Calvin's talking about the Lord's Table and he says, "I'd rather experience it than understand it." I'd say it's the same thing in this. I'd rather experience it. And so we're a congregation that we want you to come and experience being part of who we are. So that you can experience being given the opportunity for transformation in your own living, in your own life. As you do this you start to realize that the real testimonies are not testimonies that are memorized, but they are testimonies that are drawn into the memory of God himself. They are testimonies that memorize us. God's life's so strong, that it starts to literally define who we are, starts to become our life. So when we start to think about, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me to lie down." I'm drawn into that story.

I don't know if that makes sense to you but it's literally the heart of what I think is part of this body. Now, here's the thing. These stories are stories that are so hard to get, because they are so personal. Not private, but personal. I'm so excited our kids on Wednesday night after Easter are going to start doing the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

We talked about it a little bit last week. If you have not read them please read them. They are so wonderful; I don't care what age you are, that's some of the best stuff out there. Lewis wrote those wonderful books, and actually one of my favorites is one that they're not doing on Wednesday night. But one of my favorites is a story called *The Horse and His Boy*. And I use it all the time; I've used it with my sons, I've used it with men's groups. It really is I think a story of what it is to be a Godly man of honor. It's also a great story for women as well. What it is for a woman to be a Godly woman. But in particular I'm thinking from my perspective, just thinking about this boy, he's a little boy named Shasta. He doesn't know it but he's actually nobility, but he's lost, he's taken in by a guy who abuses him. He gets away, and as he's riding along he meets this, he's got a horse that talks, and then he meets this girl, this princess. And she's very much a princess; she's very much of nobility. He meets her, and she's got a horse that talks as well, and they go along. As they are going along they realize there is some predator that's following, turns out to be a lion. And at one point the lion comes and pursues them. And literally throws the girl, they are racing to get away, and he literally throws the girl off of her horse and starts to attack her. And this boy, now she as a princess has not been too nice to this little lad who doesn't really have any standing at the time, nobody realizes that he's nobility, he's just kind of inferior in her mind. He turns around, he's free, he could go, he's safe, but he turns around instinctively and he comes back and he dismounts and he tries to save her. Now he doesn't have one of these (rod) he doesn't know what he's going to do to save her from the lion. And so then the lion jumps on him and almost kills him. He wakes up a time away, and he's recovering. He assumes that the girl died. He's just about on death himself and the lion comes to the window. Now if you've read the *Chronicles*, you know the lion is Aslan, he's actually God. And Aslan starts to talk to this boy, and starts to let him know what the story is for him. Why Aslan attacked him. And why Aslan almost killed him. It was to give the boy the opportunity to claim the true nobility of being an honorable man. Which is not measured in kingships and principalities, but it's measured in doing the right thing. Given the opportunity to know who he was. Gave him the opportunity to receive within him the very nobility of the power and the grace of God within him. And the boy's overwhelmed by it. But then he looks to the lion and he says, "What about the girl? What about Aravis?" He thinks she's dead. "Why did you attack her?" And the lion says to him, Aslan, God says, "It's only for you to know your story, not someone else's." You have to remember that. The next time you want to judge somebody, or the next time you want to interpret his or her motives. How dare you. How dare I. I don't know their story. And it's not for me to pry; it's not to say that I don't care. But God gives me mine and I'm called to live into that and the faithfulness that I have. God made me as Jim, He didn't make me as someone else, He didn't make me as someone more accomplished, He made me as me. He gave me my story and He wants me to grow into that. And as I live and as we grow into those kinds of stories of life, they become stories that identify us. Not by our testimonies, but by the living witness of who we are.

I have a lot of heroes in ministry, and one of my great heroes in ministry is a Pentecostal pastor in a small little village in Guatemala. San Lucas Tully Mount, on

the banks of Lake Atitlan. Pastor Anaro is one of the most amazing, Godly pastors I've ever known in my life. He had a church that was just unbelievable and he had these young men up in the front and they would dance. Very Pentecostal, but very powerful. And all the youth that were there. And Pastor Anara was not really a cool guy. He was kind of frumpy. A little bit older, kind of frumpy. He carried an umbrella with him even when it wasn't raining. Nobody carries an umbrella in Guatemala, especially in a little village. Pastor Anaro carried one. There was an ice cream shop in the village and he had the gift, any time I passed that shop he was standing outside, it was like he knew there was going to be ice cream somewhere. There was something about him that just... I knew him for years, my family had spent a summer there, we'd been there on a number of trips, and I'd been working with him in ministry. For several years I'd say, "Pastor Anaro, I need to know your story, will you tell me your story?" He didn't speak any English but he had an ability to communicate. Do you have people who are like that? They don't speak the same language as you but sometimes you forget that they don't. And he would say to me, "You know the language isn't right now. The language isn't right." And so every year I'd say Pastor Anaro I really want to know your story. So finally, after a few years he knocked on the door one evening, and called me out. And he said, "Your language is good now." I thought he meant that my Spanish was good; actually that wasn't what he was talking about. He was talking about the language of faith. That we'd been in ministry together long enough, he felt like he could share something with me. And so we sat down in this clay dirt little village, waiting for Clint Eastwood to walk through, type of village. And he said that when the revolution was going on in Guatemala, tens of hundreds of thousands of people died in the revolution, it was brutal, lasted for years, and years, and years. He said that when the revolution was going our village was as a strategic place and so both the rebels and the government soldiers wanted to have control of our village. And they would come in and they would frighten us and scare us. Sometimes it would just be frightening and scaring; sometimes it would be shooting things up. But sometimes they would brutalize and murder. And one night there was a knock on his door at his house and a group of men with machine guns came, and they drug him out and they drug him to his little church, a little adobe church building that he had at the time. And there he had some of the leaders in his church and some of the pastors from the community. He was even at that time kind of the elder statesman for the Christian community there. And they bound them all and put them down on their knees. And they began to brutalize them, began to beat them, began to whip them, and began to try to frighten and to scare. I asked him, "Were these the soldiers, or were these the revolutionaries?" He said, "It doesn't matter what they were. They all act the same." He said that what he thought had happened was the people weren't frightened enough of they didn't seem to be frightened enough. He said he was scared to death, so scared he couldn't shake. But they didn't seem to be frightened enough so they needed to make a point. So the leader had an old U.S. Army issued Colt six shooter. He pulled it out of a holster, and he walked over to Pastor Anaro and he began to continue to talk. Pastor Anaro said that he told him to close his eyes and he did and he said that as he began to do it he could hear the click. And he could feel the cold steel on his head. And then he said he just sat there on his

knees with his eyes closed, and the next thing he heard was a click. He had pulled the trigger. Everyone gasped but Pastor Anaro. The leader seemed to be disgusted, and he fired the gun at the wall six times, and six times it went off. The leader seemed disgruntled, but what he did was he started yelling at everyone. He said, "Every one of you leave, you leave this village. You don't come back to this village, you leave this village, you go!" Pastor Anaro said that the next morning they weren't there but Pastor Anaro was. He said he got up and he sat in this little church. He said he would go to the wall and put his hands on each of the six shots that were there, much like standing in the shape of a cross. And he knew that he had died that night. He said, "After a while I heard a voice outside. It said "Anaro come out." It was like Lazarus. It was his wife, who was scared to death. She had no idea if he was even alive, she was afraid to go in. He came out, and he said it was like walking out of a tomb, out of his own grave, and "I was no longer the person that I was. I had died" The next morning everyone was gone but Pastor Anaro had stayed in the village, and I asked, "Why did you stay?" He said, "Because that's the place where I heard the Shepherd's voice. And I knew from my life that if I journeyed too far from that voice I'd lose it and I'd never get it again." And then he smiled and said, "Jim, if you died you have nothing to fear anyway." And I said, "Anaro, thank you so much for sharing your story." And he looked at me and he said, "Well, not my story. His story." He said, "There's only one story. His."

I never heard, as many times as I've heard him preach or speak, I've never heard him tell that. I've never shared it; this is probably the first time after probably 15 years of knowing that, that I've ever shared that. He didn't need to go out and be on a circuit with a memorized testimony. He was a man that people knew the honor, and the love, and the grace, and the forgiveness of Christ in his own life. He was the living embodiment. He was a man who knew what it was to be chastened by his own God. He was a man who knew what it was to feel as if he was lead and to know the power of the resurrection in his own life. And that's the calling that you and I have as well. Maybe our stories aren't as frightening, maybe they aren't, and maybe they're different. But we have them. You and I have and continue to have moments in our lives where God chastens us. Maybe it's wrestling with a broken relationship, or a divorce, or a separation. Maybe it's wrestling with the loss of a loved one. Maybe it's wrestling with our own bad test results and own personal health and our journeys. Maybe it's wrestling with the pain of a loved one. Whatever it might be, we have these, and we have the opportunity to let them bury us or for ourselves to live through them and to the resurrection. When I think about our congregation, that's why it strikes me that we are a congregation that wants to be transformational and incarnational. We want to be a congregation that lives in to the power that there can be a new life for us. And lives into the notion that our testimony is a living testimony. It's one that's shared by the living witness of being together one to the other.

This congregation is hundreds of years old. When I got here nine years ago, I figured that you learn a lot about a church if you go to their session minutes, their leadership minutes, every argument, every debate, everybody who didn't like

something, everything shows up in those minutes. Go read the minutes and you find out all the stuff going on in the church. So I go and I start reading the minutes, and I get up to the 1940's-1950's and realize that this church is really, I mean there was a time in the 50's early 60's that this church really had no children, there was no Ghent that we know. Other churches were moving out, going to the suburbs. And this church was really wrestling, and yet it made a statement, it made a witness to say, "We'll stay here, we believe God's called us to stay here. And to witness to the community that's here." And it did. And I was reading through those minutes, and I get into the 1960's and I read a session minute that says, there was prolonged discussion to ask this question, "What happens if an African American, a black, man or woman came to worship at First Presbyterian Church? What would First Presbyterian Church do?" Now, if you know anything about the 60's and the life of the church at that time, there were countless southern white churches that were literally paying police to guard the door so that an African American, a black man or woman, could never step foot into the worship space. I don't know if you ever remember it, when Jimmy Carter was running for president, if you're my age, in 1976 there was a big debate about his own church, because an African American wanted to join the church. It turned out to be kind of hokey because after that, the African American didn't really want to be a member of that church but wanted to just see if they'd let him in. This was a huge thing. And I was so interested to see what our congregation did and what our session did. Our session said they had a prolonged debate, and they voted to table it until the next meeting. Now that's good Presbyterianism there, right? You can't vote on anything right away, you've got to table it; it's not Presbyterian if you don't table it. So they tabled it and they came back the next month and what happened was they committed it to prayer. They came back the next month and someone made a motion and it was passed unanimously, that if an African American, a black man or woman, came to worship at First Presbyterian Church, if they showed up for worship, not only were they to be accepted and welcomed in, but the ushers were instructed to invite them, and come up with them and to put them on the first row or two of the sanctuary. Not in the back of the bus, but in the front. And I think, what a testimony. We're not there yet. Where not the body that Christ already saw in the 60's. We haven't achieved that kind of ability to be a church that knows no socioeconomic, no racial boundaries. But we're getting there.

And we're the living testimony; we're the living privilege of that. And as I reflect on this body and its story, or the story or scene that it has from the story of Christ. It makes me so excited to think of that. You see this is the kind of story that you and I are given the privilege of living into here. We're a congregation that not only cares for people that come... I'm so excited, Lucy Gates and Mark were talking the other day in our children's ministry area and Lucy was commenting, actually I think it was a small group and Lucy was talking about it, that the people that teach our children, our Little Lambs and our Radical Kids, our kindergarten and elementary little kids, the people that teach them overwhelmingly are not parents of those children. You know how huge that is? That there are people like Jim Thomason, who, and every time I see Jim Thomason he's carrying some visual aid or something for the kids

who love him. Do you know what witness that is? And you know those are not the people who are going around going “Hey look at me, I don’t have kids here but I’m doing this.” They are living the story. And we’re given the privilege of being part of the scene. We’re given that privilege that amazing thing.

Jim Gates did a wedding for a very active young couple in our church one weekend ago, and it was so wonderful to me to see when Carrie and Chris B. were married. When they sent their wedding invitations out, they sent out the places, which is always I think very polite to do if you’re thinking about getting married I’ll tell you this, to send out the places where you’re registered, so that people will be able to know what they can get you and where to go, so they sent out three places where they were registered. But they also had on the card, in lieu of gifts, Chris and Carrie ask that you support the Tree of Lives ministry, this works to treat and prevent the spread of AIDS in Africa. For more information under donate what to do. And that may seem like a small thing, but that’s a huge transformational, incarnational thing to do to me. A young couple at a time in life when it is so easy just to be drawn into your own celebration. Who’s keeping a focus in their life and in their marriage.

I did a wedding yesterday for Shannon Snider and Kevin Cole, Shannon’s a young woman who came through our young singles, she came to Christ through you, through this congregation in some miraculous powerful ways. And her life has been an ongoing transformation and she wrote me a thank you yesterday on her wedding day, she gave me a thank you note and it said, “I know you can’t fully realize, how much my church has helped me over the past few years, to transform my life.” That’s the word she used. “I couldn’t imagine not having First Presbyterian in my life!” That’s what this is about.

And the living out of these stories are not things that we, you can lift them up and hold them up, but they are not the memorized testimony, they are the testimonies that memorize us. It’s the body of Christ; it’s what gives us the privilege and the ability to do things that the rest of the world can’t understand. We work in Park Place; we work with our soup kitchen here on Saturday. People take their time, their hard earned and much needed time, to spend working for something where there is no payout. When we go to Nicaragua, we do living waters, we work with children, and adults, in a clinic, people who take their time and spend their money, and use their vacation time to go and to do that, and I don’t hear them coming back with written testimonies that are memorized. But what I do is I see in their lives I see these testimonies that are being memorized in them. By them. When we go to Africa. You know it’s an amazing thing, I mean people don’t like being around pain, they don’t like being around illness, they don’t like being around frustrating things. But we go to Africa and I watch people as they put hands on people who are in hospice and who are dying with AIDS, and will die sometimes even at that very moment. And I think of that amazing privilege, I have these pictures in my mind of being in the privilege of being able to do that and people think, “How in the world could you be able to do that?” But you see it’s not the end of the story. It’s a greater story. And in that greater story of Christ, of the one Shepherd who calls us there’s

this amazing power that comes. There's amazing grace, an amazing gift that comes in our lives. And that's what you and I have the privilege of doing.

And that's why it's a privilege to have our God chasten us. That's why it's a privilege to have our God correct us. That's why it's not something that we should run from, but that we should learn from. That we should ask, "Lord, what are you doing?" Because it's in those moments that we are corrected and in those moments that we are set on the right path, and as painful as it may be, it's in those moments that we come to truly know who the Shepherd is and to know his voice. And how we truly come to know whom it is and how to respond to him. And we find our true place. SO I don't know for you today, I don't know where, I don't know where God is working on you in a way that might be painful. Where He's frustrating you, or He's doing some things that you can't quite understand. But they just don't feel right and they're setting you on edge. I don't know what it is. But before you discard it, before you just assume that it's not of God. What if you asked him, "Lord, how can I hear Your voice in this? How can I hear You in the midst of what's going on? And how can I know how it is to follow You?" I think if we do that we can become the very people of God that are the transformation of the world. That are the incarnation of Christ. That are the living embodiment of who He is and what He does. Don't worry about memorizing; instead let His life, His word, and His grace, memorize you. Be pulled in to His life, and His story, because there's ultimately only one story. With different scenes, different settings. And His always ends with a new life and resurrection.

Amen.