

He Leads Me
John 10:22-30
Rev. Joy Laughridge
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I follow an Instagram account called Awkward Family Photos which regularly provides me and a million other people with some good laughs when we scroll through the Instagram feed. This week they had posted a photo that a mother submitted of her son's senior yearbook picture with his senior quote next to it. The mother explained the photo saying, "I had been bugging my son about getting his [senior] quote done before the deadline. He seemed to be ignoring me, so I gave him some advice about what not to do. Apparently, he listened this time!" The posted photo showed that he had taken his mother's advice and used it as his senior quote. "'Don't put anything stupid as your senior quote.' – Mom."

What a great senior quote- and a great mom! Looking out for her kid, helping him, not only with making sure he didn't miss the deadline, but more importantly, giving him guidance to help him avoid saying something stupid that would be memorialized forever in the yearbook. And good for the kid, for listening to his mom's advice, right? Plenty of moms have given good advice that has gone unheeded!

I begin with that today because it's Mother's Day, and giving guidance, leading, feeding, protecting, helping – these are things that are typically associated with what mothers do for their children. They also happen to be things that the Bible says that the Lord does for us, and one of the ways that that's communicated to us in Scripture is through the image of a shepherd. Our call to worship this morning was a portion of Psalm 23 – that familiar Psalm in which David, who was a shepherd, describes how the Lord is his shepherd who leads, provides care, protects, and feeds him. In our Gospel reading from John, Jesus also uses the shepherd image to speak to the special relationship that exists between himself and his followers.

Of course, the 23rd Psalm is a very familiar portion of Scripture that we hear again and again, and it's not hard to come by artistic images depicting Jesus as a shepherd. We recognize the image, and we understand what David, and Jesus, and the artists are trying to say to us through the image. Jesus cares for us. He protects us from danger. He is with us. He leads us. He helps us. He nurtures and nourishes us. For most people, I think this comes as good news. Recognizing that the Lord is like a wise, caring, protecting shepherd to us provides comfort and confidence in so many circumstances and in so many ways. When we wonder if our needs will be met; when we are facing difficult decisions and we aren't sure what to do next; when the shadow of death hovers in the form of a diagnosis or the loss of a loved one; when we are run down and burned out and in desperate need of rest and renewal; when we feel alone or we aren't sure if there is anyone who has our back; when we fear the future or have doubts about whether God will truly receive us into heaven when it's all said and done; knowing Jesus as our shepherd who helps us in all of these scenarios with all of these things makes a difference.

Today, if you are going through a difficult time, or you're needing some support, or you're looking for wisdom, the simple reminder that the Lord is your shepherd may be the singular message that you need to hear. And if you don't yet know him as your shepherd, maybe the message that you need to hear is that you *can* know him as your shepherd. Jesus's invitation to trust and follow him is for everyone, and by accepting his invitation you open yourself up to receiving and experiencing the grace, and guidance, and comfort, and help that he is ready to provide for you. We could just leave it at that, but these texts and this image of Jesus our shepherd are being lifted up today not just in the context of whatever maybe happening in our personal lives, but in the context of the Easter season, so it's worth pondering that for a moment. What is the significance of remembering that Jesus is our shepherd at this time in particular - in the midst of celebrating the resurrection and thinking about what it means to be the followers of a risen Lord?

Since Easter Sunday, we have been following the Gospel accounts about the disciples' encounters with Jesus after he rose from the dead. The days following Jesus's resurrection were filled with joy, but also uncertainty about what was going to happen next. Jesus was indicating to them that there was more to come in terms of the mission, but they hadn't received the gift of the Holy Spirit yet. Jesus had already talked to them about going away and sending the Holy Spirit, but they didn't understand yet what that meant. They didn't know that soon Jesus would be physically absent but present to them in a new way through the Holy Spirit. Up to this point, when they heard Jesus's voice, it was the audible voice of the man

standing next to them. Soon, they would hear Jesus's voice in a new way- not as an audible human voice but as the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to them from within. And instead of physically following Jesus from place to place, they would follow the leading of the Holy Spirit who spoke to them through prayer, and sometimes in dreams, and, also through other people and circumstances. And they would still see Jesus healing, and helping, and setting people free, but they wouldn't see him there physically doing those things anymore. They would see Jesus doing those things through *them* as Jesus filled them with his power through the Holy Spirit.

One of the lectionary Scripture passages that we didn't read today is from Acts, and that passage serves as an example of what it was going to look like for the disciples to follow Jesus in this new way. The passage is in Acts 9, and it's about a time that Peter was called to the home of a woman named Tabitha. Tabitha was a disciple (a follower of Jesus) and she had become ill and died. Peter was in a town close by, and he was called to come and help. When Peter got to the home, Tabitha's room was filled with her grieving friends, and in Acts 9:40 it says that Peter sent them all out of the room and got down on his knees and prayed. When Peter heard about Tabitha's death, did he know what he was going to do when he got there? Did he wonder what he was going to say, or did he wonder if or how he would be able to help? The fact that he sent everyone out of the room and got down on his knees and prayed says to me that Peter knew he needed help and he was turning to the one that he knew was with him and ready to help him. Peter was relying on the Lord, his shepherd, to guide and direct his words and actions so that he could accomplish whatever it was that the Lord had for him to do in that moment. It seems that the Lord spoke to him by the Spirit and lead him to tell Tabitha to get up, which he did, and when he did, Tabitha opened her eyes and got up.

It's this story that says something to me about why the image of Jesus as our shepherd is an important image to be reminded of, not just in the context of our personal lives and personal challenges and struggle, but within the context of the Easter season. The resurrection tells us that Jesus is alive and moving and working, still on God's mission to bring salvation, and healing, and new creation, and he means for his disciples to follow him out into the world and to join him in that work. On one hand, that's exciting and we can get really pumped up about getting out there and doing great and helpful things in the name of Jesus and for his sake, but there are also times when we might feel unsure or timid because we aren't really sure what to do. Have you ever known someone who experienced a tragic loss, and you thought about reaching out, but you didn't know what to say, or you were afraid you would say or do the wrong thing, so you didn't end up doing anything? Did you ever see a problem somewhere – people without clean water, or single moms who have been abandoned or abused struggling to care for themselves and their children- and you wanted to help, but you didn't know what to do or how to help, so you just kept thinking about it but never found a way to help? Did you ever have a friend who was going through a hard time, and you considered talking to them about how your faith has helped you in hard times, but you thought you might offend them or say something wrong, so you didn't say anything? Do you ever wonder, what can we or should we do now as a church to serve and meet new needs, or do you wonder, what is our ministry supposed to look like in this world that has changed so much since the church began 70 years ago?

As we seek to follow the risen Jesus and share in his mission, we will definitely be presented with opportune situations, and we will see needs, and we *will* find ourselves not knowing what to do or say, or we won't know how to get started, or we might feel a little scared because we aren't sure if we actually do want to get involved. The powers of evil that are at work in this world would love it if God's people backed down and gave up every time we felt uncertain, or inadequate, or unequipped to share in Jesus's ministry, but we have an option that is much better than backing down. It is the option that Peter chose when he went to Tabitha's home. It is the option to turn to and rely on our Shepherd who promises to lead us, and guide us, and help us in doing the ministry that he has given us to do. This is the wonderful thing about Jesus's call to us. He doesn't call us to do his work and then wish us luck as he abandons us and leaves us on our own to figure it out. He calls us, but he also sticks with us. He's there when we have questions, ready to provide answers. He's there when we don't know what to say, to give us the words to say. He goes ahead of us and shows us where to step next. He sustains us and strengthens us when the going gets tough, but we need to keep going.

The good news that we celebrate during the Easter season, and always, is that Jesus is alive, and today we are reminded that he lives to lead us. He lives to lead us through all the ups and downs and pathways of our personal lives, but he also lives to lead us as we follow him on God's mission. We need that help. We need to be led because it's *God's* mission and not own. He lives to lead us today, and tomorrow, and always. May we trust and follow our shepherd leader. Amen.

