

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56  
July 18, 2021

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ the good shepherd. Amen.

There are at least two ways of leading in the world. One – you lead from the front. You walk ahead and expect everyone to follow your lead. That’s the premise of Follow the Leader, right? And we all know how well that can go.

The other way, which is way less intuitive, is to lead from the back. That’s how a shepherd does it. The shepherd doesn’t expect the sheep to follow behind, because the shepherd knows that the sheep are always too busy looking down for yummy grass to bother looking up to see where the shepherd is.

So, the shepherd steers from the back where an eye can be kept on all of the sheep.

Using the long staff, the shepherd guides the sheep from behind- steering them out of trouble when need be while at the same time directing them towards green pastures. And, should they fall off of a cliff, the shepherd has the crook at the end of the staff to pull the sheep out of the mess they got themselves into.

Also, with the shepherd in the back, the shepherd never has to turn around and look to see the sheep. That would make it difficult for them to see where they are going. From the back, the shepherd can actually see more clearly. And the path chosen by the shepherd is not based on where the shepherd can go, but where the sheep can go. The good shepherd always considers the sheep first.

That’s important, right? We know that God can do things that we cannot do, and God knows that too, so God doesn’t make us do that which we are unable to do. Instead the shepherd comes to us, right where we are, and leads us from behind on paths that we are able manage. Also being led from behind prevents us from going backwards or regressing.

The Lord is my Shepherd. The Lord is leading us from behind. That really puts a different spin on the last shall be first and the first shall be last, doesn’t it?

March 22, 2020, was the last day we worshipped together before the pandemic locked us down for 16 months. On that day, I sent us out with this prayer as our final blessing not knowing what was going to happen.

*O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

This prayer was first published in an Anglican prayer book in 1941. It's sometimes called the Prayer for Good Courage or Abraham's prayer. I think it could also be called the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm prayer.

In 1941, England was in the midst of World War II and we can see how people needed a prayer for good courage to keep them going. And when you think of Abraham leaving his home to follow God to places unknown, you can see how fitting this prayer would be for Abraham as well.

And then when we consider pretty much everyone else in the Bible, and even our own families, we can see that this prayer is fitting for just about everyone. Even just getting up in the morning can require good courage. We never really know what the day will bring. I guess that's why this prayer is part of the Morning Prayer worship service.

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While I was at seminary we prayed this prayer a lot, because we really didn't know where we were going to end up. We could be placed into any situation. So, we prayed this prayer over and over again to quell our anxiety.

In reminding us that God and God's love for us is the only true constant in our lives, this prayer encourages us to live God's peace. It is peace in Christ, after all, not anxiety in Christ.

The truth is that none of us really knows where we are going. We don't. Just reflect back on your own life. When you were a kid could you ever have imagined where you are right now? I know I didn't. If you would have told me I would live in Nebraska and Wyoming I would have told you that you were bananas.

But, the truth is that we are like sheep. Our noses are down and we're so busy looking for the next yummy piece of grass that we end up in places and situations that we could have never imagined.

I mean, how can we? We only have the information that is literally right in front of our noses, but somehow we end up where we need to be.

As Yogi Barra said, “No matter where you go, there you are.” And God is there with us, leading us and supporting us all the way.

Yesterday we commemorated Bartolome de las Casas. He started off joining the military in Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. He was sent off to the Caribbean. While there he was given a huge plantation with indigenous people serving as slaves. Eventually he became a Dominican priest and set all of his slaves free.

He then traveled all of the Caribbean working to free all of the slaves. He was then appointed Bishop of Chiapas and then returned to Spain to continue his work of freeing the slaves in the king’s court, and now on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July every year we remember how the Holy Spirit worked through him to set people free. Guided by the good shepherd, he continued God’s work for the sake of the world by just taking the next step that was set before him.

Led by the good shepherd, all of us are guided into those places where God needs us. Granted, it may not be literally freeing slaves, but every day we come in contact with people who are being held captive by fear and we have the good news that will set them free. That is the ministry we are called into through our baptisms. That is the venture to which we have been called.

In faith, we just keep going one step at a time. Thanks to the Holy Spirit who comes to us in the scriptures, in the sacraments, and in our relationships with other believers, we know God’s peace in all circumstances - the peace of Christ. So, as we have been set free we set others free.

The peace of knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God as found in Christ Jesus our Lord, the good shepherd, is empowering. The one who is looking out for us, caring for us, is leading us into the future filled with hope.

Jesus is not rushing off in front of us and calling at us from across the river to come join him there. No. Jesus is here, traveling with us at our pace as we look for yummy grass and do the everyday things that people do, even in the valley of the shadow of death, like a worldwide pandemic out of which we haven’t yet fully come.

The good news is that God is with us – leading us and guiding us – and that brings us peace, because we know that God already knows the way and that because God truly loves us, we will not be abandoned on the side of the road.

Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. Because he has already been here and experienced all that we do, he knows the way to eternal life and he will take us there.

Because of that, we keep going. We keep taking the next step – along still waters, in green pastures, and even when death and enemies surrounds us. Jesus knows the way, because he is the way. He is God's steadfast love for us personified.

As Paul says after years of ministry and as Job learned directly from God, we can only see through a mirror dimly. We can't always understand what is happening, because we are not God. We can't see the whole picture, but God is leading us through the landscape set before us.

That is our peace in Christ. The good shepherd is always leading us. The one who was willing to die for us, will never walk away from us. He is always loyal and faithful to us, even when we are not loyal to him and when we lack faith.

You are never alone. Christ is with us always, dwelling among us and leading us like a good shepherd who only wants life for all of creation – eternal life.

So, trusting God's love and faithfulness, not our own, we simply take then next step forward knowing that God is always looking out for us and guiding us, because Jesus Christ is the good shepherd.

Thanks be to God. Amen.