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First Congregational UCC, Appleton, WI
Good Shepherd Sunday, April 21, 2024
Psalm 23 & John 10:11-18

About a year ago, my Doctor of Ministry cohort took a pilgrimage to the Isle of Iona, off the coast of Scotland. Iona has long been a magnet for Christian community and pilgrimage. A monastery founded in the 6th century thrived until time and vikings took their toll. Benedictine monks later built an Abbey in the midst of the ruins. The Abbey stood empty after the reformation until a minister from Glasgow transformed it into the heart of an international movement for peace, justice, spirituality, and worship renewal.

I've lost count of how many friends I've known who have visited the island. I just learned that folks from this congregation traveled there some years ago.

It is a popular destination, but it is not an easy journey. To get there, you fly to Glasgow, take a train to Oban, board a ferry to the Isle of Mull, ride a bus along a very windy one-lane road, and run to catch another ferry to the Isle of Iona. By the time my fellow pilgrims and I arrived we were weary but full of anticipation. A hush fell over our normally chatty group as we stepped from the ship to the dock.

The isle has been called a "thin space" - a place where heaven and earth touch, "where only tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual." I hoped that I would encounter the Holy on this storied bit of earth. I worried that I would not. And if I am completely honest, I also felt a twinge of skepticism. There was a lot of pressure to have a profound spiritual experience on Iona, and in my experience, you can't force profound spiritual experiences no matter where your feet tread.

So here's the thing people don't usually tell you when they share their pilgrimage testimonies: on the Isle of Iona, you need to watch where your feet tread.

Because in addition to being a place of religious significance, it is also a place of agricultural significance. I am trying to tell you there are a lot of sheep. Like, so many sheep. They are everywhere. And so is the evidence they leave behind. One minute you are humming the refrain from worship stuck in your head - *thanks be to God who delivers me* - and the next, you are thanking God for delivering your foot from yet another pile of poo.

The photograph on the cover of the worship bulletin today is one I took on my way to St. Columba's Bay to walk the labyrinth. I can tell you with absolute certainty that the sheep of Iona also walk the labyrinth. Strangest labyrinth experience of my life. And yet, oddly: walking that prayerful path very, very carefully was one of my most profound spiritual experiences of the week.

The pilgrimage was scheduled just a few short months after the unexpected death of my father. I did not laugh easily on that trip. But walking the labyrinth while actively dodging piles of sheep poo made me laugh out loud. Anne Lamott calls laughter carbonated holiness. God will use anything to remind us of God's presence.

During my days on the island, I returned time and time again to Psalm 23. The sheep and pastures seemed to summon the words:

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.

Wherever we read this Psalm - on an island, in a memorial service, or on Good Shepherd Sunday, we need to remember what is true of every Psalm: it was a prayer Jesus prayed. The psalms - all 150 of them - were the prayerbook of Israel. As Christians, we pray these prayers the same as we pray any prayers: in and through Jesus. Before Jesus taught his Disciples to pray the words of what we call the Lord's

Prayer, he showed them what it meant to be formed by the Psalter. The teachings of Jesus were permeated with allusions to these ancient prayers. Some of the last words he uttered on the cross were a quote from a psalm.

Our Gospel reading today is saturated in the wisdom and symbolism of Psalm 23. How many times had Jesus murmured these words? It's poignant to imagine this prayer on the lips of God's son as he walked through the darkest of valleys, brow still slick with anointing oil, in the presence of enemies yet radiating radical trust that he would indeed dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

And just as he experienced God as his Good Shepherd, Jesus understood himself to embody that role for his followers. Just as he experienced God as a loving Father who was with him, a Holy and unwavering Presence, Jesus understood his vocation to be with and for his flock.

This is not about sheep in an idyllic meadow. The pastures may be green but they are not peaceful. The wolves are lurking.

A bad shepherd might succumb to the fight or flight instinct. They might meet the violence of the wolves with force, or run for the hills. But Jesus is no bad shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He takes the image from Psalm 23 and subverts it: the body of the psalmist is made to lie down for rest and renewal. The body of the Good Shepherd is laid down, willingly, to die for the sake of the sheep. Jesus surrenders his life voluntarily - the text makes this abundantly clear. No one takes his life from him. He lays it down of his own accord.

The beauty of Good Shepherd Sunday is that we celebrate it during Eastertide, the season in which we are most keenly attuned to the reality of Resurrection. We know that just as Jesus alone had the power to lay his life down for us, he also had the power to take it up again. The wolves don't win. Nothing can circumvent Jesus's mission to be with us.

In a reflection about Psalm 23, a theologian and pastor named Isaac Villegas made this claim:

"The gospel can be summed up in the psalmist's word *with*—that God is with us, that we are with one another, and that we are with God when we are with one another."
God is with us, we are with one another, and we are with God when we are with one another.

As I said, my hilarious labyrinth walk was one of my more profound experiences in Iona. It was also one of the few truly meaningful moments I experienced alone. Everything else about that pilgrimage hinged on the word "with." Singing with, praying with, walking with, and marveling over puffins with my fellow pilgrims - that's how the magic and mysticism of Iona made its way into my soul. As one of my friends put it: "The trip was good. The people were amazing." *God was with us, and we were with one another, and we were with God when we were with one another.*

Several years ago, a theologian and therapist named David Powlinson offered up a different sort of reflection on Psalm 23. He composed what he called an anti-psalm. It was not a prayer Jesus prayed.

I'm on my own.

No one looks out for me or protects me.

I experience a continual sense of need. Nothing's quite right.

I'm always restless. I'm easily frustrated and often disappointed.

It's a jungle — I feel overwhelmed. It's a desert — I'm thirsty.

My soul feels broken, twisted, and stuck. I can't fix myself.

I stumble down some dark paths.

Still, I insist: I want to do what I want, when I want, how I want.

But life's confusing. Why don't things ever really work out?

I'm haunted by emptiness and futility — shadows of death.

I fear the big hurt and final loss.

Death is waiting for me at the end of every road,

but I'd rather not think about that.

*I spend my life protecting myself. Bad things can happen.
I find no lasting comfort.
I'm alone ... facing everything that could hurt me.
Are my friends really friends?
Other people use me for their own ends.
I can't really trust anyone.
No one has my back.
No one is really for me — except me.
And I'm so much all about ME, sometimes it's sickening.
I belong to no one except myself.
My cup is never quite full enough.
I'm left empty.
Disappointment follows me all the days of my life.*

This anti-psalm takes my breath away - such a vivid expression of fear, alienation, and loneliness. It's painful to read because it accurately reflects the desperation many people do experience. Perhaps you, too, have had moments - or seasons - where you muttered an anti-psalm in your soul rather than a psalm on your lips. I certainly have.

The anti-psalmist was right about one thing: we cannot fix ourselves. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves from such despair. The only way out of fear is love. The only way out of alienation is embrace. The only way out of loneliness is communion.

Friends, we need a flock. And our flock needs a Good Shepherd who would go to hell and back to be with us.

It does not mean we are whisked away from shadowed valleys. The wolves are still lurking. The pastures are not just bordered by treacherous valleys and surrounded by enemies. The pastures are coated in chemicals that poison the watershed.

Still: God is with us, we are with one another, and we are with God when we are with one another.

Reverend Villegas continued: "Week after week, I listen to the prayers of my people—their grief at the loss of loved ones, their pleading for the end of racism, their petition for the end of the violence of guns and bombs, their call for God's justice and mercy. As I listen, I feel as if our world has stumbled into a valley of death. The psalmist knows this world. There is no promise here of life without enemies or evil. Instead, in the valley, surrounded by enemies, the psalmist sees a table—a place for fellowship and communion, for being with God and with one another. Around the table—that's where God happens."

Rest in God's holy presence. Practice being with one another in a way that honors the Spirit in our midst. Listen to the voice we have come to know and love - a voice that will always call us to be with and for our neighbors.

Thanks be to God.