

10/28/2014 -- Stained Glass Window #8: The Good Shepherd Window

Scripture: Psalm 23; John 10:1-10; Rev 21:1-5

Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

This window, our eighth stained glass window, is the emblem of our church. It is the largest and was the first to be installed, back on October 3, 1965. It is dedicated to Mrs. Alan Bird. Here is the prayer that was read during the dedication service:

(.....)

Last week, we talked about Psalm 23 from the perspective of sheep. Someone came up to me after the service and said to me, “You realize sheep are the stupidest of all livestock animals, don’t you?” I said, “Of course I know that.” The implication, I think, was that I was saying everyone is as dumb as sheep. I don’t actually think that, but as I was thinking about it, at the very least we can say this: Our relationship to God is very much like a shepherd’s relationship to his or her sheep.

Today, as we look at our window, we can see something about the path which Jesus as our shepherd is leading us. The window builds from bottom to the top and follows along the verses of Psalm 23, beginning at the very bottom with what could be considered the simplest of all our faith claims as Christians: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

The window tells us that the focus is *goodness and mercy*. God’s goodness and mercy and our ‘not wanting’ are both known to us through the goodness of creation. From the very beginning, God “*saw that it was good*”. After the creation of human beings, God “*saw everything that he had made and, behold, it was very good*” (Gen 1:31). Or consider the words of Psalm 8, a love song to God for the creation he has provided: “*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you set in place - what is the human being that you think of him? and a child of humankind that you care for him? And you made him a little lower than heavenly beings, and with glory and majesty you crowned him*” (Ps 8:3-5). The Psalm begins and ends with “*O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*”.

This is where we begin at the bottom of the window. The goodness of those green pastures and still waters prepared for us are for us to come to know the glory and goodness of God. In that goodness, we shall not want. Psalm 104 says, regarding the creatures of the planet, “*They all wait for you to give them food at the proper time. You give to them; they gather it. You open your hand, they are filled with what is good. You hide your face, they are terrified. You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground*” (Ps 104:27-30).

It is here that our path begins. While there are many different and winding ways we each travel, there is one shepherd leading us. For today, imagine that everything which has happened to you which has pointed you to the goodness of God is a time when you have been aware of Jesus leading you. Those times of being lost and where you have lost sight of the goodness of God are times when you have forgotten that you are being led to a particular place by God and Christ. As God’s children and Christ’s sheep imagine that your choices are which part of the lush field you will eat in, which view from the edges you will look upon, with whom in the flock you will deepen a relationship. And as God’s children and Christ’s sheep, just for today, imagine that you do not have a

choice of which flock you will be in or which field you will feed in or what other fields are out there. Can we trust the path Christ as our shepherd is leading us?

This path we are on together is a path of God's goodness and grace. It is a path which has come to us down through history and if we look closely, we can see the wave of God's grace gathering up all who are in the path of that wave. John 1 says, "*All things came into being through him, and apart from him not one thing came into being that has come into being*" (Jn 1:3). Through the window, you can see little lambs at each depiction of Psalm 23. You and I are these little lambs. As Jesus tells us in our reading today, "*...the sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out*" (Jn 10:3).

In our window, angels oversee the provision of God. They give the oil for anointing, the overflowing cup. And so we move down the path, or up the window, led closer to the ends and desires God wishes for all of us. The Lamb of God, Jesus, gathers up the children of God, us, and guides us to the table of the Lord, to places of comfort and hope. "*Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*" We are drawn into this flock and, in that choosing by God, we follow on a path which God desires for us. It is a living path, a changing path and a path which always has our best interest in mind.

Our window speaks to us on physical and material ways - God's simple provision and care of us; and in spiritual ways - we are being led to a greater, eternal story with God and Christ. Remember what Jesus says about God when he is speaking about the resurrection of the dead? He says in Matthew, "*Have you not read what was spoken to you by God, who said, 'I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living!*" (Mt 22:31-32). A living faith, a living relationship with God and with one another, a living future spiritually and materially given to us by God - this is what we know as we are led down the path by Jesus. This is why, in valley of the shadow of death we can fear no evil, for God is with us.

Along with God's goodness, this is also a powerful image of God's mercy. The early Puritans used to consider baptism - our 'earmarking', if you remember - an act of mercy for all who receive it. This act has a negative cast, in the sense that we are constantly in need of God's mercy because of our fallen nature; but it also has a positive cast as well, when God's mercy has been shown us we also become merciful. "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*" (Mt 5:7).

Once we come to rely on Jesus as the Good Shepherd and therefore on God's goodness and mercy, we begin to live out of our future with God. We begin to "*live in the house of the Lord for all our days*". One of the phrases that always gets stuck in my head from Psalm 23 is "*you prepare a table before mine enemies*". We heard one interpretation last week - the table mountains where sheep summer and the preparation the shepherd must do to welcome the sheep. Another is that, even now, in the midst of our lives here and now, we are living into the future we have with God. Probably the most powerful image of that future is the table God prepares for us in Isaiah 25. "*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken*" (Is 25:6-8).

Our window walks us along the path from God's goodness, led by the Good Shepherd Jesus, through God's creation, in the knowledge that God walks with us. Knowing God is with us means we know God's mercy in good times and bad times, in valleys and storms and high ground and low ground. He guides us and comforts

us. And then we are led to the Lord's house, the Lord's table. This is what the top of the window is showing us. The house of the Lord is what we celebrate when we come to the table once a month and partake of the bread and the cup. We meet the Good Shepherd materially and spiritually there. Remember what Jesus says of himself in the Gospel of John? *"Then Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me shall not thirst'"* (Jn 6:32-35).

Goodness and mercy shared with one another is goodness and mercy given by God for God's glory and our pleasure. When we look to our Good Shepherd, we see not only who we are, as we spoke of in our discussion of the Beatitudes and the window depicting them, but also who we are becoming, as we spoke of in our discussion of the Transfiguration window. We see where the Good Shepherd came from, as we saw in our first window, and that there is much we share with the Good Shepherd, since only a savior who knows us and our lives is a savior who can save us, as we saw in the Temptation window. The stories and parables the Good Shepherd tells us, as we saw in the Parables window, let us know that, not only does Jesus understand us, he also wants us to expand our spiritual lives in this world now.

It is upon this winding path we follow Jesus. After a while, we begin to see the future God has in store for us through him, that we begin to see the frame and architecture of the house the Lord wishes us to live within. Once we get a glimpse of that place it is as if the *"first heaven and first earth pass away...and we see a new heaven and a new earth...the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband"* (Rev 21:1,2). In this place, together with one another, we enact our future right now. Most thinkers on this verse see the church as a model for the New Jerusalem. I am sure there are some Sundays when it does not seem that way to you, but that is okay. Our Good Shepherd, Jesus, sees it that way, and that means he sees you that way as well, a little lamb led to the table of the Great Banquet we will share with God on the mountain, a child of God led to the house of the Lord, where each of us will dwell all the days of our lives.

Amen.