



“Good Shepherd Sunday”

Sermon by the Right Reverend John Stephens

Easter 4 Year B April 25, 2021

Episcopal visit to St. Stephen’s, West Vancouver. Combined Zoom worship
with St. Stephen and St. Christopher

Readings: Acts 4: 5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3: 16-24; John 10: 11-18

What a delight to be with you here at St. Stephen’s. Well as close as possible to being with you given this pandemic. I trust that you are well and staying safe. I hope that many of you have been vaccinated or will be soon. I pray for an end to this time of pandemic and with that a renewed vision of what God is calling us to do with what this pandemic has taught us.

As many of you know I have been a Bishop since the end of January and the diocesan Bishop of New Westminster since March 1. I am still working my

way into this ministry and I have much to learn from you and many others around the diocese. It is a great honour to be with you on this day in particular as your beloved rector, Jonathan, is retiring and heading back to England. When Jonathan told me that he was going to be retiring I was a little bit rude to him, I have to admit and told him that he should stay. You see I didn't want him to retire, I wanted him to be staying in ministry here in the diocese for a good many more years. I value Jonathan's insight, his experience in ministry, his perspective, his wisdom, his faith, his hope and trust in God. Jonathan knows what ministry is all about and that it is centred on relationships. Relationship with God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and relationship with the people of the parish, the people of the surrounding community, the people of the deanery and archdeaconry and diocese. Jonathan is very aware of the depth of love that God has for him and how he is called to live that and show that.

I am very sorry that Jonathan is leaving but if I am honest I am also delighted for him that he is going back to England to be with his family and to hold his beautiful grandson, Henry. I am so sorry that Jane, his sister-in-law has recently died but I also know of the rich and beautiful relationship that he had with Jane as she journeyed closer to death. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

This Sunday is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday and the readings for today are the obvious reason for this. But it is also a day to reflect on those shepherds, like Jonathan who touch our lives and change us and our understanding of who God is and how God walks with us in this lifetime. A shepherd who knows the presence of the resurrected Jesus, the one who came back to his disciples and who prayed that they might know peace, the one who continues to call us to deeper faith and hope in God. A shepherd who knows that the Holy Spirit is calling us to new purpose and vision. And so with Jonathan's ministry in mind and his role of shepherd on behalf of the Good Shepherd, let's explore that image for a bit.

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.

The famous words of the 23rd Psalm touch something very deep in us. These words, if we let them nudge us a little bit, seem to speak directly to us. They seem to tap into something that many of us struggle to find the words for and somehow they name what many people search their entire lives to discover.

They point to a craving, a desire, a desperation, to get past all the peripheral of

life and push deeper into the meaning of it all. They try to name what it is at the true centre of who we are, away from all the trappings of this life and right at the core. They name one of the greatest human desires, a spiritual connection with the One who first called our name.

The Lord is my shepherd... A shepherd is an image that seems out of place in modern day West Vancouver, suggesting a different location and a different time. But even so it is an image of God that still works for many of us. A shepherd is a guide, a presence, a protector, one who is with the flock at all times, one who seeks the best for the flock. But it is the image of God as one who is leading to green pastures and still waters that really seems to strike home. In all the chaos of this busy modern world where few people seem to know how to slow down to discover a connection to the presence of God, those green pastures and still waters invite us closer to restore our soul. I think that this pandemic has caused many of us to pay a little more attention to what is most important, what gives true meaning, what our lives are all about, those places of green pasture and still water. It is in this quietness that the good shepherd whispers our name. And this psalm reminds us to seek out those places. Places where we seek out the holy presence of God, who goes beyond our business plans and scheduling and instant messaging and breaks into our lives with what is real and true and good. It is so often only when we

find green pastures and still waters that we discover just how desperately we need to restore our soul, broken and battered by a world keen to cover it over with things that glitter and sparkle but do not feed us, truly feed us.

God 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.

This is the deepest and most meaningful promise of God found throughout the scriptures: I am with you. God has shouted, whispered, cried and prayed this message to us since God first breathed life into us and this universe. It is our hope since the beginning of time and seen in the person of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. I am with you, even if you walk in the darkest valley. And there are plenty of dark valleys in this world. Plenty of them that we know and those that we love have encountered as well. They can be found at dining room tables, hospital wards, back alleys, shouted words or broken hearts, they are often the words we fear hearing the most. Dark places that seem to cut us to the core but still God's voice is known. God's promise is felt as a presence, a peace, a hope, a calm, a trust that indeed God is with me.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me. We, especially here in North America, we have been taught, we have been told that we should never be satisfied. We should have more. We deserve more. We have earned more. But God is telling us that goodness and mercy follow us wherever we go. It is not saying that we will not walk through darkest valleys, for we know that we do. It is saying that goodness and mercy follow us. It is saying look around. See and notice all that God has given you. Celebrate that a lot more, give thanks a lot more, accept God's forgiveness and mercy a lot more, enjoy the gifts of life a lot more, acknowledge how incredibly blessed you are a lot more. For it will transform you and you will notice God's gifts changing what you seek for yourself and your life. In fact you will find that you do dwell in the house of the Lord your entire life and beyond that. You will discover the kingdom of God all around you. A kingdom where you know, experience, feel and hear the voice of God all around you, continuing to whisper to you much as a shepherd might.

Jesus said it this way in the gospel of this day: I am the Good Shepherd. He also said I lay down my life for the sheep. And they will listen to my voice. He said this and it reflects what we heard in the 23rd Psalm. We need places, green pastures, still waters, a living room sofa, a quiet morning where we think about the Good Shepherd, where we seek to acknowledge the presence

of the Good Shepherd, where we stop to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, calling us, inviting us, whispering to us our name and urging us to live as people who know this Shepherd in our lives. Aware of how this shepherd restores our soul, walks with us in dark valleys, journeys with us, grows with us, opening our eyes to the goodness and wonder of life. We are changed because of it, aware that indeed our calling is to become much more fully aware that indeed we do dwell in God's house our whole life long.

Jonathan was ordained a Deacon in the Southwark Diocese in 1990. Since that time he has served in a variety of ways in England, Europe and of course here at St. Stephen's West Vancouver. Today marks the day that he is retiring. It is a time, I am sure, of mixed emotions as the joys and celebrations come to mind but also the eagerness to move on to quieter things and a different pace of life. Jonathan has invited many people over those years to discover the green pastures and the still waters, to discover the Good Shepherd who leads us, the one who walks with us no matter what valley we walk through. May Jonathan know God's blessing upon him and with him and through him as he journeys from here. Jonathan is a kind and caring shepherd to so many, one who knows the voice and the compassion of the Good Shepherd and lived that out throughout his ministry and throughout his living.

May we who have known Jonathan be influenced by his words and actions to be resurrection people because we know God's voice telling us I am with you now and always.