

## **“When We Need God the Most”**

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The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

OK- you've read and heard the Gospel passage this morning. But don't get put off by John's portrayal of Jesus as one who, horrors!, mixes metaphors, or John's portrayal of us as sheep. Try to focus on John's purpose in this tenth chapter of his Gospel as he uses two metaphors of Jesus—as the Good Shepherd, and as the gate or door, to get our attention to the double truths of how much God cares for us, and how he opens up new opportunities for us in a changing world: When we need God the most, he is there, as a trusted guide who cares for us, the Good Shepherd who opens doors for us.

I remember when I began to discern that Good News firsthand. It was after my first year of seminary in New York City when I was back for the summer in Springfield, Missouri, once again doing admissions work for my university. I had finished an exhausting first year in seminary and a challenging year as a newly-wed living in Manhattan. I wasn't sure what the next year would bring, and so what did I do?

Almost every day I would stop by the little chapel of Christ Church, Springfield, which was open night and day for prayer. I had grown up in that church and served at the altar for years until I graduated from high school. Now, eight years out of high school I was discovering, maybe for the first time, what and why my church was there for me.

At a time when we feel the most empty, God feeds the part of us which is the hungriest and most in need of feeling. Inscribed on the walls of that chapel were the words of Psalm 23 that we have said or sung this morning: The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. you spread a table before me, my cup runneth over. Such familiar words, but so powerful when we need to hear them.

It was a time for me like Fred Buechner writes “like sheep we get hungry (but) for more than just food. We get thirsty for more than just drink. Our souls get hungry and thirsty; in fact it is often that sense of inner emptiness that makes us know that we have souls in the first place. But once in a while (we feel) that inner emptiness being filled...that is what (the Bible) means by saying God is like a shepherd. God feeds that part of us which is hungriest and most in need of feeding.”

I found that feeding in my prayers as I read Psalm 23 on the wall and said its words with my heart and lips. You too can lay hold of the same promises in your time of need.

And we all have those times. We're all raising families these days, or trying to keep track of families who are going through the most remarkable times of change than any

generation has experienced before. I've gotten to know the occupations of several dozen of our parishioners, and whether or not he or she is in cancer research, or in real estate sales, or teaching kindergartners or eight-graders, or serving as a church rector or whatever the world as we knew it fifty years ago, or even ten or five years ago, just isn't the same any more. So how do we survive in this changing world, much less thrive by being useful to ourselves and others?

Survive, and thrive. Yes, we have survival, security issues beyond another 9/11 attack or a crane dropping on us, or our mutual funds sinking lower and lower. We do everything we can pay for to take care of those security issues, but it never seems enough.

To say the least, "safety and security" is a very high-tension subject these days. In Google I found 113 million entries when I keyed in "security" (and only 64 million for God, if that proves anything.) Anyway, one of the ways we defuse our tension about security is humor, and for me the classic comic strip "Peanuts" is still a resource.

Linus, as most anyone knows, is compulsive about his security blanket. Once Linus is waging a battle with Snoopy the dog over the security blanket. At last Linus wins, only to be confronted by Lucy who (as you suspect) yells at him for being out in the snow and the cold wrestling with Snoopy. To which Linus replies with a sigh, "the struggle for security knows no season."

And it doesn't. So what do we do? Do we just recite psalms 23, or 100, or 91, or 46? Or read the words again of a comforting hymn like 645 "The King of Love My Shepherd Is". You could do worse, but that isn't enough to *internalize* the promised answer that Psalm 23 gives to the persistent question about life in this crazy, changing world, "who really is a Good Shepherd? **"whose voice can I trust?"**

What has helped me to really internalize my faith in the Christ that John gives us in this Good Shepherd Gospel this morning are the sheer facts about the post-resurrection Church that emerged after the first Easter Day. That story is told in the Book of Acts, from which we have a short passage read this morning. Instead of remembering a beloved rabbi whose life of teaching and healing had been remarkable, here was a group of believers whose way of life had been remarkably changed by their conviction that Jesus was a living presence whenever they gathered to share a meal together.

Instead of living lives of fear and confusion here were these followers of Jesus sharing everything with each other, beginning to live big, open, generous, risk-taking lives. First only a handful, they began to live in a different way. And it took off. An epidemic of goodness began to spread. Sociologists have studied how a small group of defeated followers grew, in 300 years, to being the religion of the Roman empire.

How did that happen? To capsule a vast amount of information, it happened because Christians were more compassionate than the culture around them. In times of great social unrest, disease, brutal pagan practices, Christians lived in communities that

cared for each other, that welcomed the stranger, that honored women, and protected children. In short, they discovered the risen Christ, Jesus as the Good Shepherd, in their *communities, in their relationships*. They had discovered that they could trust the voice of that Shepherd to sustain them in their caring, and to be shaped by his goodness.

What those first communities were discovering was not just a “feel good” security. On the contrary, it was that security then of sharing and relationship, and now for us today, that frees and even empowers us for action in the world. It is Jesus the Good Shepherd who is also the gate opener for us. Knowing that God is caring for us and holding us in his hands, we are freed and empowered to get on with the business of caring for others, of striving for justice and tending of creation. And, I submit, that we discover that kind of God the best in communities like the church, communities for the transcendence of fear.

The security that you and I have in that understanding of God is the very thing that frees us to lean into the very insecurities of this world, knowing that nothing can snatch us from God’s hand. With that knowledge we can take risks, we can tread into the unknown, we can become *involved* in the work of God in the world.

You can count on Snoopy to be right, the struggle for that kind of security knows no season. When we need God the most, he is a trusted guide who cares for us, a Good Shepherd who opens doors for us. That is what is promised when Jesus says at the end of our Gospel this morning, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly!  
AMEN