

Security

Sermon May 3, 2009

The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

It's a total coincidence that this fourth Sunday of Easter, highlighted every year as Good Shepherd Sunday, now turns out to be in a period where a national medical alert has been declared for our country by the Secretary for Homeland Security Janet Napolitano. An outbreak of swine flu has seeped through our porous borders. So the mantle of Homeland Security has grown wider and wider, fashioning alerts and protections against terror, violence, and mass destruction.

From the dawn of history, we mortals have been concerned about safety, security, and survivability. At the beginning of this young 21st century, Americans—perhaps more than ever before—believed we had developed ways to control our lives and destinies. But terrorists broke through our porous borders on 9/11, and now swine flu—not to mention tears in our global financial system—are dramatic reminders that, in manifold ways, our lives will always be at risk.

To say the least, “safety and security” is a very high-tension subject, certainly right now. I suppose one of the ways we can defuse that tension is through humor. A long-living classic for me is Linus and his security blanket, now immortalized in the comic strip “Classic Peanuts.”

The truth is that Linus can't get along without his security blanket. In one episode of that long-running series Snoopy once again snatches Linus's security blanket and runs out the door in cold mid-winter—this time with Linus still holding onto the blanket for dear life! (We all know how hard it is to pry us away from our security blankets). At last Linus wins. As he comes back exhausted of course his sister Lucy scolds him (in her usual sweet way) “ARE Y OU CRAZY, you could die of the cold out there” To which Linus replies, sanely enough, “The struggle for security knows no season!”

And it doesn't. Much of our daily effort is directed toward making and keeping us safe and secure, creating and maintaining our various security blankets. Do you think I'm overstating? Enter the word “security” on Google and at least on Monday there were 779 million entries. Enter the word, God, and you get 511 million entries. So go figure what's important!

In a time of rising unemployment we know that installing security systems and security guards are among the fastest growing occupations. We don't have as much confidence in our stocks and bonds these days, but we do have security passwords for our credit cards and bank accounts, and a long alphabet soup of federal, state, and local security organizations, and a page of precautions with every prescription we get. But--you tell me—are these sufficient? Do they really provide all the security we increasingly seek?

Of course the question is rhetorical. The simple answer is NO—not even if you were living on a mountain in Montana, much less in the rapidly changing environment and dynamism of this greater Washington area. Security is when everything is settled—when nothing can happen to you. Security in that way is of course an oxymoron, certainly in times when turbulence and uncertainty are simply taken for granted. I suppose an honest answer to the casual greeting, “how are you?” would be “let me get back to you tomorrow on that...”

I guess the point of all this is that it's natural for us to try to hold onto something or someone that gives a sense of protection or a feeling of security, but in this world of change most of us know—intellectually at least, that we need more than this. The world we know is more and more organized for change, not for just maintaining the status quo. The challenge is to discover and **internalize** the **spiritual** resources of comfort, protection, and security that are a persistent biblical theme, in a world like this,

Think about what some of those resources are. In this tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, probably written by old St. John perhaps fifty years after Jesus' death, the whole experience of the risen Christ in the believer's midst is portrayed in the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, who gives us protection and security because of his unity with God, his father.

For centuries the people of Israel had recited Psalm 23 praising God for refuge from distress, sin, and enemies. John would see that image having been finally realized in Jesus That would be true in Psalm 100 “know this! The Lord **himself** is God...he has made us, and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture” And you can turn the pages to Psalm 46, 90, and 91 for similar words of reassurance. Think of the themes of security, faith protection and comfort this morning as we sing hymns 664 and 645, rich with variations on Psalm 23.

But think a little deeper about what gives us real security. I know how much my heart has been fed by hearing and reading those comforting words to give us a sense of peace, but they should do more than that. I also know that the Holy Bible is principally a drama of God's mighty acts, and in that drama, there are no easy or permanent

stopping places. I think we need to get it into our heads that, as one writer says, “There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power.”

We need not only a sense of comfort, security, and protection from the words of Scripture and our songs of faith and praise, but we also need—especially now—the courage, strength, energy and spirit to handle the shocks and traumas of the short-term and the stresses that present themselves as we look ahead and plan for the future. Next Sunday, is Mother’s Day, and on that day I’m always reminded that we need not only the best sense we can have of our family and spiritual **roots, and** we also need the lift we can find from spiritual and family “**wings**” so that we are strengthened to rise to the changing challenges and opportunities that God puts before us.

When it comes down to it, no sermon, no Psalm, no hymn is enough for spiritual security. Getting and giving information about Jesus is good, but by itself that cannot bring us to accept him as our Lord. It will be **in relationship** that we will find spiritual security as persons of faith, facing the future unafraid. The fullest meaning and value of our lives with the resurrected Christ will be discovered as they are **shared together in community**.

And that, my friends, is the community we gather together to be on Sundays, week in and week out. A colleague and friend from Vancouver, Canada, has suggested a way to understand what we do on Sunday mornings. He says, “ Maybe the gathered church seems as ordinary as Susan Boyle, who has created such a sensation from the UK TV program “Britain’s Got Talent” now seen by millions here, thanks to YouTube. (Have you seen it? —if you haven’t, you need younger friends!) She’s not a ravishing beauty, but she sings like an angel. She’s kind of like the Church is, in these difficult times: not very prepossessing but having a song that is a powerful and beautiful thing when we sing of Jesus as the King of Love, my shepherd is, and that “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Well, yes, this is one way to think of what we do here. For, yes, I believe that there is no greater summons to the Church of Jesus Christ as truly a “Good Shepherd”, than to become a **community for the transcendence of fear**—not the escape from fear, for that is not a test of faith. A community for the transcendence of fear lives by engagement, contact, and involvement, not by insulating us or isolating us!

Well, that’s a bigger hope and vision than we can ever get from Lucy and Linus. But Linus **was** right! “The struggle for security knows no season.” AMEN