

***A sermon preached on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022 based upon Psalm 23 and John 10:22-30 entitled, "The Mystery of God's Leading"***

*Psalm 23*

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.*

(Let me pause here. The familiar translation is misleading: "He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." It suggests God leading is all about our doing the morally right thing, a good thing for sure but it gets in the way of the larger idea expressed — that God is leading us along the pathways through which we need to pass.)

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over. Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

As I mentioned last week, as I approach retirement I find myself doing a lot of reflecting on the path my life has taken, and so my attention was captured by the claim made in this beloved psalm — that if the Lord is my shepherd, then I can trust that in some way beyond my comprehension that God has been leading my life in the past, and will continue to do so in the future.

It's a big claim, and a pretty basic one when it comes to the life of faith. But it's one that is as confusing as hell in terms of understanding what exactly it means.

In a little while we will sing a familiar hymn that includes these words, "*Whatever I do, wherever I be still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.*"

There are a lot of different ways to picture that divine hand. Is it shoving us? Does it have a light touch – one we can ignore if not paying attention? Does it block off certain paths, so we are compelled to go in a certain direction? Does this hand show only show up at certain times, and leave us on our own at others?

The truth is, I really don't know how to picture this hand.

Looking back over my life, there are times I can recall when it seems as though there a metaphorical sea had parted – an opening emerged to walk through that seemed kind of mysterious and an unseen hand bidding me to move through that opening. The coming together of Sarah and my retirements had this quality. We knew retirement was coming – that our energy was waning and we needed to shift into that new phase of life called retirement to experience life in new ways before our energy wanes further

– but we were pretty clueless about how this could happen – where, in particular we would retire.

And then a year and half ago we suddenly found ourselves with two of our three children living in Maine, and Kate started looking for houses for us, and very quickly found one in a town named Belfast where a lot of interesting, creative things were happening.

The name of the town had a significance that felt like a sign. Shortly before the pandemic, we'd taken a trip together with all three of our adult children – something we'd never done before – travelling to Belfast, Northern Ireland where Bobby was playing soccer. It was a magical time together for our family. And now Kate had found us a house in a town called Belfast. It seemed like God had opened a pathway for us to pass through.

But these “parting of the sea” moments are pretty rare, and the question remains: in what sense can we say God is leading our lives? There are ways of making this claim that can have serious problems. I mean, there is real evil in this world, and there are some really bad things that sometimes happen in life that we have no business attributing to the hand of God. We shouldn't say God sent some evil into our lives, and we especially shouldn't say that about the lives of others who suffer as a result of evil.

We should also be wary of course when people do offensive, hurtful things and claim they did so following God's leading.

I don't think God micro-manage our lives. We make choices and others make choices that impact our lives that in the present moment are very much “wrong choices.” And yet there is a mystery in which bad choices can sometimes set the stage for extraordinary experiences of God's grace, as is the case in Jesus' story of the prodigal son and the bad choices he makes at the start of the parable.

Part of the difficulty with recognizing how the hand of God is at work on our journey is that we can't see the “big picture” of our lives, and sometimes the little picture – the present phase of our life – can be just plain awful. The path our life is taking can seem like nothing more than a haphazard series of dead ends – leaving us feeling utterly lost.

To claim that God's hand is leading us is to express our hope that in time we will begin to see something of the bigger picture of our lives – one in which some kind of pattern emerges to all the twists and turns our path took – that we'll begin to see that we've been led somewhere – not so much to a place as to a quality of life where we are able to live more in harmony with Jesus and his great love.

I can look back on my life and recognize times of struggle that were miserable to go through that I now see as having a meaning: Times of depravation, for instance that

led me to appreciate certain blessings that arrived later in my life in a way I wouldn't have appreciated had I not experienced life without those blessings.

Looking back on my life there is also the recognition that experiences of suffering – experiences I would never have chosen – led me to know compassion in ways God could put to use. God wants to lead us to a place where we become more fully human and we can't be fully human without knowing compassion.

Frederick Buechner shared two stories from his life that I haven't forgotten since I first read them which I find helpful on this theme. I'll tell one now and the other later. Once, while waiting for a connecting flight, Buechner entered an empty airport bar to order a drink to calm his nerves with his anxiety about flying. With every seat available to choose from, at the one he chose he discovered a tie clip that someone had left. He picked it up and saw that it contained three initials. To his amazement they were the three initials of his name, in the correct order – a sign to him that in some sense his arrival had been anticipated – that in a way he couldn't possibly comprehend he had been led on the path he found himself traveling.

The Apostle Paul said, *"All things work together for good for those who love God,"* which points to the truth that in order to recognize and cooperate with the leading of the Good Shepherd, we need to intentionally be in loving relationship with God. This morning's Gospel lesson points to this truth. It comes midway through John's Gospel.

There is this unfortunate thing that happens in John's Gospel, which is the people who were resistant to Jesus' ministry are referred to as "the Jews" which can have the unfortunate consequence of promoting the cruelty of antisemitism and overlooks the fact that Jesus and all his disciples were Jews. So, in my reading of the passage I want to let you know I am taking the liberty of replacing such a reference for the people who approach Jesus in the Temple.

*John 10:22-30*

*At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. (There were some who came to Jesus and said to him,) "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe.*

I want to pause here to note that I went back to check all the times the word "messiah" occurs in the Gospel of John. There are quite a few, but curiously they are all spoken by people other than Jesus speculating about whether Jesus is the messiah. Jesus says many extraordinary and mysterious things about himself but he never actually says, "I am the messiah." Perhaps this is because the word inevitably becomes a box constructed by our preconceptions that can't hold the full mystery that we are invited to encounter in Jesus.

*The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."*

A lot hinges on how we understand Jesus' words, "you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." A lot of people have understood these words to express what is known as "predestination" – with the implication being that if God has chosen you to be one of Jesus' sheep then believing in him will be easy, and if you're not chosen, well you might as well give up, Jesus will never make any sense to you. In other words, God is interested in leading the lives of some, but not of others and if you're not one of the elect, God doesn't care about you.

That, I believe is simply wrong. Part of the problem is that the word "believe" is misleading. What it doesn't mean is that you can sign on the dotted line of some doctrinal creed that explains exactly who Jesus was.

"*Believing in Jesus*" as John talks about it would be better understood as choosing to live in relationship to the mystery Jesus points to – a relationship in which trust deepens over time. The disciples in John's Gospel chose to follow Jesus not because they had him all figured out – quite the contrary – we constantly hear how the things Jesus does baffles them, as does the great metaphors he uses for himself: "*I am the resurrection and the life.*" "*I am the light of the world.*" "*I am the bread of life.*" "*I am the vine and you are the branches.*"

These things Jesus said about himself make no sense if we take them literally – they only begin to make sense if we understand them as metaphors pointing to a great mystery.

The disciples didn't have Jesus all figured out, but having spent time with him – having "abided" in his presence as John's Gospel puts it – they recognized in him Truth with a capital T that opens up life's meaning – a truth that can't be nailed down with words but only experienced in relationship. Being in relationship with Jesus doesn't mean we never struggle with doubts or unanswered questions. The people who came to Jesus to say, "*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly,*" are people who are unusually uncomfortable with mystery – they are people with an inclination towards fundamentalism.

There are two polar opposite types of fundamentalism. There is the fundamentalist who feels the need to claim that Scripture is inerrant – that every word is literal truth – because making this claim seems to take away intolerable ambiguity and confusion.

And then on the other end of the spectrum, there is the fundamentalism expressed in hardcore atheism – the people who convince themselves that believing in God is absolute lunacy – that if you can't put something under a microscope, it doesn't exist.

So, if words are inadequate to fully express the mystery of God, what *can* we say with confidence about Jesus?

Well, as John's Gospel states in its most famous verse – 3:16 — *“God so loved the world”* — that is, every one of us – that God gave us Jesus – which is to say that the great love of our Creator is most clearly expressed in Jesus – in the words he said but even more the life he lived — modeling the Good Shepherd who like a Good Mother persists when her child is lost in seeking, seeking, seeking until that child is found.

And we can say with confidence the Good Shepherd intends – as Jesus said in our passage — to lead us in due time safely home – which is to say one day that which we can now only *“see through a glass darkly”* – the fullness of God's great love — we will enter in some complete way.

So, faith isn't about having the mystery all figured out – it's about deepening trust and love as we seek to live in relationship to this mystery that is God.

The second story Buechner told that I haven't forgotten involved a time in his life when one of his teenage daughters was in the grip of a deadly eating disorder. There was nothing he could do to *“fix”* his daughter, and he lived in a constant terror that he would lose his beloved daughter to this disease.

Buechner described sitting in his car one day at a railroad track waiting for a train to pass, swamped by fear about his daughter when he happened to look at the license plate of the car in front of him and saw the one word he said he most needed, and that was the word *“Trust.”* In his astonishment over encountering this word of all words he suddenly felt as though he wasn't alone in the valley of the shadow, that he could begin to let go of his desperate attempt to hold tight to all that was out of his control.

Over time, Buechner was able to let go of his daughter enough to allow her to travel a facility far away where she could receive from professionals the kind of love she needed to find healing – a love distinctly different from the only kind of love he was capable of at that point in time as a fear-stricken father.

Yogi Berra famously said, *“when you come to the fork in the road, take it.”* Yogi's words are funny because he messes up the dictionary definition of fork in the road – two distinct paths to choose between. But it occurred to me this week that there is a kind of wisdom hidden in Yogi's words, and that is the fact that there are times in our life when the direction we're moving suddenly changes. You could say we encounter a fork in the road, but there isn't really a choice to make in terms of possible directions.

Such was the case for Buechner when his beloved daughter got sick. The path of his life had veered off in a direction that terrified him.

At such times there may be a different kind of choice which perhaps Yogi's famous saying is getting at: the choice to somehow embrace the path we find ourselves on. Will we trust that God is with us on this path we never chose to be on?

I want to finish with the words of prayer written by Thomas Merton, a man who in his 53 years of life covered a lot of twists and turns. Merton grew up in a very secular household – a sophisticated, New York City intellectual atheist. Over time he felt led to convert to Catholicism and then to flee the world into the silence of a monastery in Kentucky, becoming a Trappist monk.

There he wrote books that impacted people throughout the world on the subject of prayer and contemplation. He re-engaged the world, writing prophetically about the great moral struggles of his day — the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam.

Overtime he moved from being a highly orthodox Roman Catholic to finding common ground with the forms of contemplation found in Eastern religion. One of the most enduring things he wrote are the words to this prayer:

*"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.*

*"I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone." Amen.*