

“A WORD TO THE SHEEP”
Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; John 10:11-18
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Four years after I moved to Duluth as a newly minted minister, a woman in her late twenties, a young mother like myself, was raped and murdered while running on the North Shore. Such crimes are uncommon in Duluth, and the entire community was shocked and made uneasy by it. Even worse, the police had no leads as to who might have done this. The murderer was never found. The woman’s memorial service, held at the Methodist Church, was filled to overflowing. Upwards of eight hundred people crowded into the church that day, looking for a word, some word, that would heal or comfort or make sense of this violent tragedy.

The minister picked, as his text for the day, this morning’s gospel reading. “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” When he rose to speak, a silence—grim, expectant, hopeful—settled on the crowd. If ever there was a teachable moment, this was it. And then the minister opened his mouth, and out came a string of platitudes about God’s knowledge and love of us. You would have thought the woman died peacefully in her sleep after a long wonderful life. The crowd grew restless. You could hear the rustling frustration in the room. And the woman sitting next to me, someone I knew only slightly, leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Where the hell was the Good Shepherd while this woman was being raped and strangled?” Actually, what she said was a good deal coarser than that, and she was not a woman given to vulgar expression. I took her words, as they were meant, as a fervent cry of the heart—trying to make sense of random pain, suffering, and death in the face of the God who claims to be Good Shepherd to us. This sermon is for that woman 21 years ago, and for anyone else who struggles to make sense of the personal and institutional horrors of human life and a God whose orientation is first and always love.

I warn you before I begin that I will not answer all your questions or neatly package the problem of human suffering and serve it up tied with a bow. But there are things that need to be said and understood by us as Christians if we are to live an authentic and biblical faith. And the place we begin in understanding John’s words about the Good Shepherd is not with the beginning of this passage, but the end, where Jesus says, “I lay down my life for the sheep. I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”

Think about Jesus’ words in the Garden of Gethsemene as the soldiers come to take him. Peter picks up a sword and seeks to defend his beloved teacher, and Jesus says basically, “Stop. Don’t you think I could handle this by invoking God’s power?” The one who could cure the sick, walk on water, raise the dead—surely he could have evaded a small band of soldiers in the dead of night. But, instead, Jesus chose to be arrested. He chose to suffer. He chose to die. The Holy Week story is all about choosing: choosing sacrificial love over the exercise of coercive power.

I absolutely believe that the God of heaven and earth has the power to intervene in the world of human evil and blundering, and bring an end to hunger, or stop our wars. God could stand

between drunk drivers and their innocent victims, create on this earth a well-ordered, non-threatening place where evil is blocked and only good things can happen. And in my weaker moments, I confess I think I long for that: for God to use God's power to keep us all safe. But at what cost would that safety come? There's the question. What is the cost to us if God stands between humankind and the consequences of our actions, maintaining the world in a kind of enforced Disneyland? If God keeps us safe, then we have no real freedom, because we lose the ability to choose in any significant way who we are to be and how we are to act. Our lives and actions no longer have meaning.

God has chosen, instead of the way of power, the way of self-sacrificing love: making us in God's image, giving us maximum freedom—therefore minimum protection—handing over the world that God so loves into our care. God has given us real responsibility for our lives and for the earth. So we can burn fossil fuels with reckless abandon, pollute our air and water and soil; we can unleash the dogs of war, and rape and kill innocent victims on the shore of Lake Superior, and God will not intervene in power to stop us. Even though our actions cause the Good Shepherd to suffer over and over again, God will not take away our freedom. Ever.

Safety or freedom. Protection or meaningful choices. Our very humanity is grounded in our ability to act and for those actions to have consequences, good or ill. Take away our lives as responsible agents, and we are . . . what? I can't even imagine who or what we would be. I do not in any way want to trivialize the problem of the suffering of the world caused by evil, irresponsible, misguided, violent, or desperate human beings. The only thing worse I can think of—the only thing worse—would be for us to live lives that could cause neither suffering nor joy, neither building up nor tearing down, the inability for us to make the world whole because we had lost the power to destroy it.

God chooses to turn aside from God's power so that we might find our own, and learn to use it well. Every decision we make is a gift from God. Remember a few years ago when those WWJD—what would Jesus do—bracelets were all the rage? Granted they were hokey, but I can think of worse questions to ask before acting. The questions I would ask us to keep before us as we make the choices of our lives—big and small—are as follows: Does this choice reflect my understanding that the power to choose itself is a gift of God? Does this choice express my gratitude for that gift? Does this choice express my responsibility to take care of God's world and all that dwell therein? It is a daunting responsibility that God has given into our hands and our brains and our hearts; and all too often, we have not chosen well. A parade of unjust wars, the brutality of the world's poverty, gang violence in our cities, and a woman raped and murdered on the North Shore of Lake Superior testify to that. And the reality that it is up to us to change it is all but overwhelming. Again, the only thing worse I can think of would be to have that responsibility taken from us. Choose carefully. Thanks be to God. Amen.