

**“THE GOOD SHEPHERD?”**

**John 10:22-30; Acts 9:36-43**

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How many of you have seen the original Peter Pan musical or the movie—not the Disney version, but the one with Mary Martin playing Peter Pan? There was a song in that movie, “Tender Shepherd”: “Tender Shepherd, tender Shepherd, let me help you count your sheep. One in the meadow, two in the garden, three in the nursery fast asleep.” When I was a child, my mother used to sing it with me and my sisters as a bedtime prayer. And it worked. I went to bed every night sure that the Good Shepherd was watching over me, and nothing could harm me.

But over time, that good shepherd image has grown more difficult to hold in focus. The more I learned of the world, the more of a challenge it became to relate unambiguously to the figure of a God who stands over us protecting us from all harm. And I know I’m not alone in that. We all know that too many of God’s sheep end up sick, or hungry, devastated or dead as a result of random accident, hatred, or natural disaster. Even for the most faithful of us, the most learned and spiritually mature, it’s not easy—some might say it is impossible—to find a way to think about, much less speak together of the goodness of God and the evil of the world without resorting to cruel platitudes or else saying honestly, but not satisfyingly, there is just no good answer to that “why.”

Most of us, most of the time, tend to deal with the difficulty of this question by not dealing with it. There is so much else to explore and think about in our rich faith tradition. When the question of God and suffering comes up, we probe tentatively about its perimeter; we feel its weight and pain for a time, and then move on, only vaguely uneasy about leaving the unanswerableness of the question lying open on the table until the next time we pick it up to wrestle and prod deeper, or at least more .

But sometimes it doesn’t work like that. Sometimes we can’t let the question go. I have a friend, Bob, who lives in Wisconsin. We’ve known each other since high school. Bob is, quite simply, the most intelligent and probably the most knowledgeable person I have ever known. He is a lawyer by profession, skilled in the art of debate. Though he has no formal theological education beyond a ‘Bible as Literature’ course in college, he has read more theology—ancient to modern—than probably 90% of the professional theologians and pastors in the world. He can quote to you in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew; he’s sort of a show off that way. I think that’s also the lawyer in him! But over the years, he has been my most faithful and persistent theological sparring partner.

About three years ago, he would say because he was nearing the age of 60, and I would guess brought on also by a trip to Africa as a volunteer aid worker and by personal tragedy, Bob began pushing relentlessly on this question of God and evil, or perhaps more correctly, it began pushing on him. It wouldn’t let him go. It still won’t let him go. Though he continues to attend church, he proclaims himself an atheist, a proclamation steeped in anger, pain, and a sense of betrayal. In his post-Easter e-mail to me, he wrote: “I would love to talk theology with you. Sure, *Credo quia absurdum est*—but I can’t get past the *absurdum* to the *credo*. God is a lullaby sung to us from an early age to keep the monsters in the closet at bay (even though He/She doesn’t), and Heaven and Eternal Life simply a fairy tale to draw the sting of death. (O

death where is thy sting?? I'LL show ya where!) Yeah, the Kingdom of God is within you, 'cause it sure ain't anywhere else. God is an absentee landlord, and it stinks.

Still, on Easter Sunday morning, when the brass struck up the intro to "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" oh man, I believed. It worked again. He was risen indeed. It works every Easter. And then wears off about an hour later. But it was great while it lasted."

Can't you feel the honesty of his struggle? Doesn't it break your heart? And the reason I bring it up here this morning is that over time, I have known too many people like Bob, persons with deep roots in faith for whom some piece of our faith tradition becomes intolerable, so intolerable that it throws into question the entire realm of God and belief, and they feel they have no choice but to cast off their faith, and drop it in the road behind them. The question of God and suffering has, in my experience, been the most common. But in the 1980s and 90s, too many good and faithful women and some men found that they could no longer live with the paternalism of the Bible. They couldn't work around it or ignore it, or explain it away as historical accident. It simply hurt too much. Two Quaker friends, despite diligent work in historical and theological context, have let go their belief in God because of the violence of the Bible. They just could not put together a loving God and the violent words and actions of both Old and New Testaments. One of my best friends left the church, though I tried my darnedest to offer her alternatives, because she believed, after careful study, that the God of the Bible and "The Church" condemned all non-Christians as wrong, as heathens, as headed for hell, and she could not live with that dissonance of spirit. She had had enough of the Christian God. For all these, for each of these, I hear their stories in my head. I see the pain in their eyes. I grieve their loss. I feel the empty space in the church where they once lived, and it is a significant loss to lose those who have struggled so bravely and persistently to find God. .

And the reason that I speak of this this morning is to say out loud that it's genuinely hard to be a Christian; hard not just because following Jesus is a challenge even to the most spiritually generous and mature of us, but difficult because there are great unanswerable questions in our faith, and deep sinkholes of difficulty in our sacred scriptures. If we are serious about our faith, we either have to come to some intellectual and spiritual accommodation to these challenges, or our very integrity of faith will lead us away from faith.

And it's something we don't talk about in church, or if we do, it's not often enough or seriously enough. Though we are practiced in the language of diversity of belief, I don't know if people in this congregation who are truly struggling over if they can live and accept the reality of God, and I will bet that there are some of you out there, I don't know if we have made this faith community a safe place to voice such deep conflict and reservations. Are we OK if the person in the pew next to us tells us that they are beginning to disbelieve the entire notion of God, that the Good Shepherd really is no more than a child's bedtime nursery rhyme?

And the reason that the question of our acceptance is important to me is because I don't know this to be true, but I think it's probably true that when people are going through intense religious struggle, the only way we can help them is to stand as close as they will let us, to listen carefully to their searching, to allow them to speak the fullness of their doubt and to take it seriously, to hold them, to hold their faith when they cannot hold it themselves. And to let them know that it is not the faithless but the faithful who

struggle so. We can't answer their questions, but as another one of Bob's friends told me, we can offer to hold their backpacks and make them a lunch as they go off to fight the dragons that block the road of their path to believing.

It doesn't seem like enough, but if you noticed earlier, my friend Bob, though he calls himself an atheist, was in church on Easter Sunday. He's in church almost every Sunday; and what brings him there is not the preacher or the music, but the congregation of friends who have surrounded him in his struggle, who pack him a new lunch every time he shows up, who allow him to be who and where he is, with God, without God—but they will not let him go. They have picked up the mantle of faith he so deliberately left behind him, and they hold it safe for him should he decide to return.

There's a reason the Good Shepherd holds her sheep in flocks. Because sometimes it is only us fellow sheep that can keep other beloved ones from losing sight of the shepherd all together. Thanks be to God. Amen.