

Psalm 23- Right Paths

I prayed about what to say today- and realized- the text for this Sunday, on how God guides us to right paths, even in hard times, is what we need. Last week, I talked about how we face the unknown times surrounding us because of a global pandemic. This week, although I know we have folks from around the state and country listening, I'm going to focus on a situation that's affecting us at Bee Creek UMC: the reality that my time as your lead pastor is coming to an end soon. I know most of you have already heard the news, but just in case there were other things grabbing your attention, I announced 2 weeks ago that I accepted an appointment to serve as the new lead pastor of FUMC in McAllen, TX. That appointment starts in June and my last Sunday will be near the end of May. So today, little flock, let's talk about God's right paths so we can be comforted and encouraged in this time of transition.

Most of us know that sheep are prone to wander. But I hadn't known the flip side, that sometimes sheep left to their own devices don't wander off at all, but keep only to a certain, familiar, beloved path. Given an entire pasture, they wear down a little path, choosing to stick with what's known, certain and safe. Sheep are fearful, so only walking a certain path is a way to guard against fear and keep things manageable. We get that, don't we?

But there are so many dangers in just letting sheep pick their paths. First, they miss out on the rest of the pasture that their shepherd has prepared for them. They eat up all the grass in one area AND well-worn spots quickly become infested with parasites of all kinds: worms, nematodes and scab. By choosing one path through an expansive pasture, sheep are guarding against their fear, but limiting their forage and sickening themselves in the process. They never get to enjoy the fullness of what their shepherd had prepared for them.

We're like sheep in this way. We also can guard against our fears by sticking to a smaller scope, a known circle. We may know God has more for us, but we play it safe and keep to what we know. God, our Good Shepherd, sees us trodding that worn path and calls out. Invites us into the fullness of his beautiful pastures, and then out and away, into the wild, beautiful unknown. Down new paths, beside quiet waters, up steep trails, through dark valleys. That's the picture painted by

this psalm- the life of a flock in God's care, those who have followed God into the great unknown. God calls this kind of path, this kind of life, right.

And now, God is calling us, Bee Creek, out of what we know and into the wild, beautiful, right paths of what's next. There will be many, many days when we wish with all our hearts for the nice little worn paths of the pasture. But comfort and familiarity are not worth missing out on the journey God has before us. I don't want that for myself, as much as I cherish the paths I've walked with you here. And I don't want it for you, my wonderful Bee Creek family. Today we need to claim the promise that God will guide us in right paths, for the sake of his name.

Two things: These are right paths. Not hidden paths. Shepherds aren't trying to give their sheep the slip. Shepherds don't obscure the right path and then praise the few sheep that manage to find it. When a shepherd guides his flock out into the open fields, up through mountains, to the high tablelands of the summer range, he's constantly calling to them, pointing out the right path. The shepherd sets a pace the sheep can follow, even the smallest lambs. He uses his staff to gently guide and reassure the flock. Right paths are not hidden. The Shepherd makes them plain.

When the Bishop called me, I thought we were going to talk about writing and books, as we often do. **I had no desire to leave you. I'd even been told I was needed right here.** The Bishop didn't tell me I was going to McAllen. He asked me to pray about it. To see what God was saying. I called Kevin and we talked and prayed. Then prayed some more, telling God I need to know his will, not mine. The next morning, as I opened my devotional, the scripture for the day was this: Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, *"Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."* (This is a wilderness road.) Acts 8:26

Get up. Go south. This is a wilderness road. Y'all. I've never heard a devotion on this verse in my life. And there it was, waiting for me, when I was asking for guidance. As I prayed over the next days, more scriptures came, Abraham leaving all he knew to go to a land God would show him, Jesus' call to his disciples to carry Good News to all people. I was glad that God's path wasn't hidden. I love this church. Nothing but the call of God would cause me to leave. God is calling. I just have to have courage to do it. To leave the familiar and beloved and follow God into the unknown, again.

Which brings me to the second aspect of right paths. **Right paths are not easy paths.** God's paths can be difficult, sacrificial and challenging. I have followed God into the unknown before. Many times. That's what brought me here. And you've followed God into the unknown, too. Ten years ago, this church had to say goodbye to its founding pastor, the only leader many here had ever known. There were tears. But this church opened its arms to me in hope and faith.

Together, we have walked into amazing new places. None of those have been easy. Committing to give away a tithe- hugely scary when we set our feet on that new path. Building the gym debt free- nobody said we could do it. But each time, God called and we stepped out in faith. And every time- we find our feet on a beautiful path – I can't imagine where we would be today if we had chosen comfort and familiarity over God's call.

When I first came, one of you explained our ethos at the church like this: we hear God's call, and see a huge cliff. He's saying to jump, but we don't know how we'll make it. The help never comes while we are standing, pondering the choice. But once we jump, God catches us. He always has. But we have to have the faith to jump before we know how he's going to do it. Right paths are not easy paths.

We choose to walk them not for our own comfort or ease, but because they are good. They are God's paths. They lead to life. God guides us to right paths for the sake of his name. The shepherd doesn't open the pasture gate and lead his flock into the wild unknown to torture them or harm them, but so they can be strengthened and nurtured and grow.

So... how do we walk the path that is now before us, this right path, that is also new and hard? Well, we allow God to take the lead. God leads me in right paths. God leads *me*. I don't pick a path and invite God along. I pay attention to where God is, the direction God is setting, and I put my feet to those God's path, with hope and trust.

Healthy sheep are constantly aware of their shepherd. Always looking, listening, watching where he is. As long as they keep their eyes on the shepherd, sheep can walk through any terrain without fear. They just step where their shepherd has already placed his feet.

And, the sheep rely on each other. Sheep surrounded by other sheep who are wandering and discontented pick up on those habits. But sheep that are surrounded by other sheep who are attentive to the shepherd, have a flock that helps them walk the path ahead, no matter the terrain. Sheep do better finding right paths when they are with other sheep who share the same goal.

There is a lot I love about this place. I love my home, my kids' schools, the amazing therapy Asher gets. I love my neighbors, my family being close. But most of all, the thing that makes all the rest shine, is you, the people at this church. You are world-changers. You are imperfect and no ashamed to say so. You are invitational, caring about those who are lost, inviting them to Jesus' side. You find the hurting. You bind up wounds. I knew from the first day I met you that I loved you. You have been family to me and mine, and I will ache to leave you.

But you get to keep each other. You get to walk together through the days ahead. You have the best flock possible all around you. Hold together, flock, because what you have here is rare and beautiful. And it won't change, it will only grow stronger with the years.

God guides us along right paths. Not hidden paths. Not easy paths. Right paths. God leads the way, our flock is at our side for support.

Everyone wants green pastures and waters of rest. We have an idea of what that should look like, of the worn, comfortable path we already know. But we find right paths when we allow God guide to guide us into all that is ahead. I promise, it will be good. With God, it always is.