

## Belong, Behave, Believe

## Psalm 23 John 10: 22-30

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Our drawing this morning depicts the way an 11-year-old artist named Luke images God as Shepherd. Luke calls this figure the “Smiling Shepherd” and offers this explanation:

“That’s the world on the shepherd’s t-shirt. ...God thinks [this planet] is the most important place. He cares. He’s got his sleeves rolled up for work.”<sup>1</sup>

We can look to the two Scriptures we have read today to get an idea of the sort of work the smiling shepherd does on behalf of this planet and those of us who inhabit it. Our readings from the Psalms and from John’s Gospel can teach us much about what it means to be a part of the flock cared for by the Divine Shepherd.

One way to enter into those insights is through the model of faith described by Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. Butler Bass suggests that, in response to God’s call upon our lives, we move from belonging to behaving to believing, and I think our morning’s Scriptures support that idea.

There is perhaps no better known, no more beloved Scripture than the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which in its most familiar translation begins *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want*. The psalmist opens with a statement of belonging, which is even more personally expressed in the translation which David read: *Lord, you are my shepherd – I want nothing more*. With this affirmation, the psalmist proclaims an identity as God’s own creature and claims a place within God’s community of care.

He then enumerates the behavior that arises from this belonging – the behavior of both shepherd and sheep. *You let me lie down in green meadows; you lead me beside restful waters. You guide me to lush pastures for the sake of your Name*. The shepherd provides the boundaries and direction which allow the creatures in his charge to flourish – and does so as an expression of the Shepherd’s compassionate nature. The name of this Shepherd is Holy Love and for the sake of Holy Love, the shepherd enables behavior which keeps the sheep safe and reinforces the sheep’s conviction of belonging.

Thus, the one who belongs to the Shepherd and has experienced the security of behaving within the Shepherd’s guidelines comes to a place of believing in the steadfast trustworthiness of the Shepherd, and express what he believes in this way: *Even if I’m surrounded by shadows of Death, I fear no danger, for you are with me*. We may know that verse better and love it more

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<sup>1</sup> *Imaging the Word*, Vol. 1, p. 198

in the cherished King James version: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*

In each of these translations – and every other way this verse has ever been translated -- this is a ringing statement of **trust** in the goodness and the grace of the shepherd. And that is why believing follows belonging and behaving – because it involves trust. It is through experiencing the comfort and security of belonging and through experiencing the purpose and blessing of behaving that we – the sheep of God’s pasture – come to believe in the goodness of God, come to know – deeply and truly – that God can be trusted to be with us even in the darkest, most difficult moments. Even when we travel through the valleys which bring fear and pain and sorrow into our lives, God is there, reaching out to comfort us, to guide us back to lush pastures.

We know this because we know that we are God’s. We belong. *Lord, you are our shepherd.*

The remainder of the Psalm continues to describe the sheep’s life within the framework of belonging, behaving, and believing, culminating in a statement that combines all three:

*Only goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life / and I will dwell in your house, Lord, for days without end.*

In a companion piece to the psalm, our verses from John’s Gospel also use the metaphor of shepherd and sheep to describe the relationship between Jesus and his followers. Here we find a similar pattern of belonging, behaving, believing. Jesus says: *My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*

In her book, *Christianity after Religion*, Diana Butler Bass writes that “Long ago, before the last half millennium, Christians understood that faith was a matter of **community** first, **practices** second, and **belief** as a result of the first two... Jesus did not begin with questions of belief. Instead, Jesus’ public ministry started when he formed a community.”

Jesus says: *I know my sheep. I give them eternal life.*

We begin our relationship with Jesus by belonging, by finding a place of welcome and purpose within the community of fellow disciples.

Butler Bass continues: “The early community that followed Jesus was a community of practice. Jesus’ followers did not sit around a fire and listen to lectures on Christian theology. They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, what to do in the world. They healed people, offered hospitality, prayed together, challenged traditional practices and rituals, ministered to the sick, comforted the grieving, fasted, and forgave. These actions induced wonder, gave them courage, empowered hope, and opened up a new vision of God. By doing things together, they began to see differently.” Rather than being held accountable for

their opinions about God or Jesus, the community measured faithfulness by how well its members practiced loving God and neighbor.

Because they belonged, they were able to act toward one another in ways that expressed, reinforced, and expanded the community. They were able to serve neighbor and world, not to earn a place with Jesus, but out of confidence that they already had a place close to Jesus.

It centers our life to belong to Jesus; it opens our life to behave out of that belonging. And these experiences of belonging and behaving point us toward the goodness and the grace of the triune God, leading us to belief. Scripture teaches us the pattern. As Butler Bass puts it: “In the biblical pattern of faith, believing comes last. Indeed, this pattern repeats in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. From the calling of Abraham and Sarah through the great prophets and heroes of Israel to Jesus and the early church, those who walked with faith started by following, by becoming part of God’s community, by enacting the practices... [This is] what Jesus preached: a beloved and loving community, a way of life practiced in the world, a profound trust in God that eagerly anticipates God’s reign of mercy and justice.”

*Lord, you are my shepherd – I want nothing more.*

*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*

I do want to say that if you are hearing this refrain of “Belong, Behave, Believe” and mentally calculating where you fall short on that checklist, please stop. It isn’t a checklist. It isn’t an assignment. It isn’t a set-up for failure.

And it isn’t a requirement that we never allow ourselves to have questions about what it all means. That we never allow ourselves to doubt.

Doubt is not the opposite or the enemy of belief. There is room – much room – in a faithful life and heart for moments of wondering where we are to find and how we are to proclaim our loving God in the midst of trouble and tragedy, whether personal, communal, or global. Indeed, when we are fully engaged with our own experiences and with the realities of the world, it is difficult, perhaps impossible not to have such moments.

I have been struck lately by the juxtapositions in this Easter season. We are living in, giving thanks for, the great good news of Resurrection, but we must do that even as we hear bad news, frightening news, heartbreaking news, seemingly on every side. There seems to be nowhere on this earth that is not facing threat – from measles outbreaks and the growing antagonism between those who support and those who oppose vaccinations; to renewed weapons testing in North Korea and nuclear activity in Iran; to increasingly dire reports on the urgent need to halt climate change. In too many places, poverty, war, oppression continue.

In the face of these and every other danger, sorrow, and injustice – we are called to trust that God remains sovereign over the universe and, as Julian of Norwich affirms, “all shall be well”, even when we don’t yet see how or when. If we understand that believing in God is the companion rather than the prologue to belonging to God and behaving in response to that belonging, we are able to hear and trust the good news even in difficult times because we are included in the community that proclaims that good news and that works to heal the world. We can continue to claim our place in the community of the faithful and continue to live the practices of faith as we ponder the questions that live within our belief.

Many people think that Mother’s Teresa’s most important gift to the world was her journal, published after her death, in which she wrote of her own doubt, her dark nights of the soul. That doubt did not keep her from belonging and behaving. She continued in her compassionate care for the dying; she continued to reach out with the loving hands of Christ. And so the words of doubt which she wrote in her journal and the witness of service which she offered with her days together tell her story of belonging to her Lord, behaving as he taught her, and believing that she was called, even in and through and beyond her doubt.

How does the pattern of “belong, behave, believe” find expression in your life? I invite you to spend some time this week thinking about whether that description fits your experience of discipleship. And I encourage you to spend some time after that considering how you might offer a place of belonging to someone who needs one; considering whether there is a practice – a way of behaving – that you would like to add to your days as an expression of your faith; and sitting with what you believe as a prayer of gratitude or of supplication.

*Lord, you are my shepherd – I want nothing more.*

*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*

The Smiling Shepherd’s sleeves are rolled up and the Shepherd stands near. We are in the care of the triune God to whom we belong, for whom we live, and in whom we believe.

Amen