

“Going Home”
First Presbyterian Church
Marshfield, WI
October 15, 2017
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My wife, Flo Beth, and I both grew up in Colorado. She was born there, and I arrived as a nine-year-old when my father accepted a teaching position at the University of Colorado in Boulder. After we were married, Flo Beth and I moved to the east where we spent fourteen years living in New Jersey, North Carolina, and Kentucky. Every now and then we would get to go home for a week or so to Colorado. The basic route was I-70, and when we hit the Kansas border and the terrain just opened up, so that one could see from horizon to horizon, I began to feel that we were getting close to home. Flo Beth wasn't so sure. For her, home was when we could see the high peaks on the horizon, and for me too that was what marked home. Kansas was just the anteroom. Nothing can match the 53 peaks in Colorado that are over 14,000 feet high. To stand on top of one them is to be able to see the world in a completely different perspective. The whole world is spread out at your feet. As an historical footnote, it was while standing on the top of Pike's Peak that Kathryn Lee Bates was inspired to write the words to "America the Beautiful."

We all need a place that we call home, a place where we feel secure and safe and familiar. That is also true of our spiritual life. We live in a world of chaos and noise from which there seems almost no respite. The winds blow us every which way. Nothing is secure, fastened down, or particularly meaningful. Where do we go for peace, quiet, refreshment, or security? I hope the answer for all of us would be that we would turn to the Lord, but even so where do we find him? Probably my foundational, longest remembered spiritual fount is the 23rd Psalm. For some reason, that text has been my spiritual resting place for most of my life. I thoroughly dislike having to memorize anything—kind of a hard thing not to do for a music major—but I did my best to avoid it. The same with the scriptures. I don't carry a great number of them around in my head, but from my earliest days I have been able to remember and say the 23rd Psalm. It speaks to me. It gives me comfort. It brings me close to my Lord and God, Jesus. It quiets my spirit. When I read it I have come home, and so when I saw that it was one of the lectionary texts for the day, it reached out and grabbed me. I knew that the Lord would give me something to say that I hope the Spirit will carry to the hearts of all of us.

The psalm begins with the image of a shepherd, an image that Jesus applies to himself in John 10:11 with the comment that he gives his life for the sheep. The one thing of which I am absolutely sure is that he is not the shepherd of the western United States or of Scotland. He has no accredited sheep dogs who scare the daylights out of the sheep to keep them in line. Granted, there have been some hell fire and brimstone preachers, but I don't believe fear can give lasting hope and comfort to anyone. I will say that it is fun to watch the border collies work the sheep, for they dart here, there, and everywhere to keep those stubborn critters in line. But put yourselves in the place of the sheep. These dogs are not their friends. If you have

kids or grandkids, you may remember the movie “Babe” in which a pig becomes a far more successful herder of sheep than the dogs, which the sheep perceive as “wolves,” and of which the sheep are terrified. Babe just develops a relationship with the sheep, and they willingly do what he asks them to do. No, the Lord is not like the “wolves.”

It was interesting, with this imagery in mind, to spend time in Israel and to see the shepherds there. You would see a shepherd out with his flocks of both sheep and goats. The sheep were probably better behaved than the goats which wandered a bit more than did the sheep, but all were just docily following along behind the shepherd. There were no dogs, and if they were they weren’t working the sheep. They were companions for the shepherd and probably helped drive off predators. You could watch two shepherds meet each other, stand and talk a while, and their sheep and goats would get all mixed up with each other. When they parted, however, it was like the parting of the Red Sea. The sheep knew their shepherd’s voice, and the mixed-up herd split into two segments, one going with one shepherd and the other part with the other shepherd. If we are to find any peace and solace in this life, we have to know the voice of Jesus. Our inner hearts need to be tuned to his Spirit, so that we can follow him into safe places. It is there in the green pastures and beside the still waters of the river of the Spirit, that we will indeed find rest for our souls as the psalm promises. We can’t create it; we can only find it as Jesus offers us himself. He is the home to which we all need to come.

As the psalm goes on to say, he will lead us in the paths of righteousness, because of who he is. It is getting increasingly difficult to find those righteous paths anymore. Most aspects of secular society have no idea what the paths of righteousness mean. I was astounded not too long ago to hear a mother just matter-of-factly say that she assumed her teenage son would begin to have sexual relations soon. Whatever happened to chastity outside the bonds of marriage? The Christian life is a life of ethics. It is not a life of good feelings for selfish ends. It does not use other people for our own pleasures. Despite the Reformation’s emphasis on “by faith alone are you saved,” God does expect a disciplined life that we would be willing to live in the presence of Jesus. Paul had a good deal to say about sexual morality and purity. Can we as followers of the Good Shepherd just scrap the biblical ethics and present to him secularized lives? Will he accept that as an appropriate offering in the light of his incomprehensible offering of himself? Remember that he “counted equality with God not as something to be grasped, but emptied himself and became as a slave,” and did it all for us (Philippians 2:6-7). Can we really meet that sacrifice with personal indulgence? Can we meet it with self-aggrandizement? I don’t believe that is an acceptable Christian offering. That is not presenting our bodies as living sacrifices that will be acceptable to the Lord (Romans 12:1). There is no real Christianity without ethics and obedience. John told us that “Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person” (1 John 2:4).

One of the most important parts of Psalm 23 has always been the statement that he leads us through the darkest valleys. This is the psalm that I have used at almost every funeral I have ever conducted, partly because it is familiar to almost everyone, but more because it speaks to almost everyone. I use it, too, because those left behind when a person dies often feel angry, alone, and depressed. Go back with me to the geography of my “home,” to

Colorado. There is an immensely deep canyon there known as the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Its walls are almost straight down and it is 2,722 feet at its deepest. At the bottom of this very narrow canyon the river is about 40 feet wide. Despite the beauty of the canyon, when I read about walking through the valley of death, this is the image that comes to my mind. It is so deep that there is almost no way to climb out. It is fourteen miles long, and you have to walk all the way through it. Likewise, there are just some canyons in life that we have to walk through to the end. There is no way around it. The death of a loved one is one of those canyons. The loss of a job is another. For a time, I was without a job, and I had a wife and three children. I managed to find a low paying job driving a taxi cab for the elderly. I received a wonderous \$4.50 an hour! It was scary. It was frightening. I just had to believe Jesus had something else for me, and I believed that he wouldn't leave me or my family alone in this situation. For us, this was clearly the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. When our savings were essentially exhausted, we came out on the other side. A bit afraid? Yes, but I never doubted that Jesus was with us in that time, because we were trying to live life his way. We were trying to follow the call that we had received so many years before that took us to seminary, into graduate school, and then on into various kinds of ministry. However, we just had to trust that all this was part of the Lord's plan. Death is that way, whether it be ours or someone else's, for we are all moving toward it. For the Christian, death is the gateway to an entirely new realm in the presence of God. The end should not be feared, although the process is sometimes kind of rough. Still, we are never, ever alone, for the Lord is our shepherd.

He even prepares a table for me! We are so blessed. Our cups do indeed overflow, for we have come home. We in the western world simply can't imagine how much we have. We have far more than is "sufficient for our needs." We have all kinds of wants covered, too. I will never forget, and I don't believe I have used this example here, but I used it often in my classes. Since I taught World Religions I had the opportunity to travel to some of the most sacred places around the world. Several of those spots were in India. On one of those trips I took my daughter Marta with me. You know her. She has played the organ here upon occasion. Anyway, this trip was the mother of all daddy-daughter trips. We just wandered India for three weeks. Outside one of our hotels was a railroad track, and beside it was a polyurethane sheet propped up on a couple of sticks. There was a cooking fire outside it with a holder for a metal pot, and a family consisting of a mother, a father, and a couple of kids. If I had been living there, it unquestionably would have been the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. The amazing thing was that somehow they found joy in being together, no matter what their external situation might be. They could laugh and enjoy one another. Can you imagine yourselves in that situation? They had absolutely nothing! I don't know what they might have believed, but I imagine they were Hindus. Divine figures are very active in their lives, and I suspect they had an awareness that God was aware of them and that they were not alone.

My youngest daughter once decided that her kids were being spoiled by all the "things" that they had and that surrounded them. So, she decreed that they were going to have a third world experience to help them understand the blessings that they had in their lives. They set up a couple of tents in the basement, put sleeping bags on the floor, and lived down there for a week. They received a fairly meagre breakfast, and Kirsten fixed them a sack lunch to take to

school. I don't think it was Spam sandwiches, but it was close, and they might get a piece of fruit. One day she put a small surprise in for them. For a week, she tried to simulate a third world experience. I think the message got through, but if it didn't our oldest grandson is at the moment on a mission in Madagascar where the daily income level is less than two dollars a day. His brother, our second grandson, just started his mission in northeastern Brazil. I suspect both will come back to the states much more grateful for the table the Lord has set for them.

Finally, surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. I can't imagine any greater goodness than Flo Beth and I have experienced through each other, our family, and our faith. We know the Lord Jesus wraps his arms around us, and the hands that hold us have nail prints in them, as do the feet of the one who supports us and holds us up. Those marks are the tokens of what his love for us cost him. That kind of love is beyond comprehension. I can only stand in awe of it and bow in praise and adoration. When his arms are wrapped around me, I have come home. There is no place I would rather be, for there I find my security, my purpose in life, and the assurance that his love encompasses all those that I love. It also extends way beyond my small realm to my brothers and sisters across the world, whether they be along a railroad track in Delhi, India, in a hut in Madagascar, or a in a small apartment in Brazil. We, all of us, are in the hands of the Lord, if we will accept his invitation to each of us to come home.

Amen.