

“Right Paths”
Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25;
John 10:1-10

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

This is a special day. Happy Mother’s Day. It is a wonderful day to think about mothers or those who have been a mother to us in our life. In fact, I was thinking about the nature of being a mother and having small children. As a baby comes into the world, it’s pretty helpless. There’s not much it can do on its own. There are only a couple of things I can think of. Pretty much, we teach that baby all about life. We provide the food. I think about a parent going to a big store and having a little child wandering along beside them, and the child’s attention is diverted by something. The child stops, but the mother keeps moving and goes around the corner. The child looks up and it’s lost, without its mother, not knowing where to go until the mother, realizing that the child has dawdled, comes back to find it,.

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I feel a lot like that. I feel a little like a child who needs that mother to show me the way. And really, throughout life whenever it comes to something I need to learn, something new, it’s really helpful if there’s somebody who has been there before and knows how to do it, who goes ahead to show the way.

Then, as a child grows up, at least when my children grew up, I began to recognize there were more and more things that I wasn’t going to be their shepherd for. They were going to have to find help somewhere else. I didn’t know how to teach my daughter to ride a horse. I didn’t know how to teach my other daughter how to dance. I didn’t know how to teach my son engineering. They needed other people. As they go through life, as we go through life, we recognize that we can never be the good shepherd for someone else through everything, all of it. Yet, we need a good shepherd.

We’ve gone through a long sermon series, starting way back, thinking about God as being so transcendent, so “other,” thinking about the wonder of who God is, and then thinking about life and how full of the unexpected it is – sometimes feeling chaotic, a little hard to understand and control, even risky. There are certain parts of life, various moments of life, where either I don’t know exactly which road to go down or I don’t know how to get through what seems like a brick wall in front of me. Life can feel pretty out of control sometimes. We need a good shepherd.

Part of what I have been trying to say is that God is really incredibly fantastic, beyond our understanding, and life is sometimes a little beyond our comprehension and control. What those two things come together around is that by God being so other, God can come alongside. I don’t think God is part of creation, so God is not in any thing in creation, but rather God is here as God. Just because God is other doesn’t mean God can’t be present. I’m not Bruce, and yet I’m present with Bruce. I’m present with you all, just like God is present with us. We have, I think, a hard time both imagining who God is because God is really beyond our imagination, and also recognizing God’s presence. Thankfully, God keeps coming and bringing people to help us see God’s

care for us. I could go through a list, but the one we're thinking of most recently, particularly at Easter, is Jesus.

God recognizes that we can't fully see who God is. So God comes to us in Jesus to help us recognize two things: one, that God is not far away; and two, that whatever we've done doesn't keep God from coming to us. Through Christ we are forgiven. By Christ, God is present with us. We need that one who can see beyond what we can see. I think that's what is so wonderful about God coming. God sees the big picture. God knows how it was created. He had a hand in it and so can help guide us to live in what God has created.

I continue to have this image of God leading us into this territory we can't quite see the topography of. We can see the geography around us. We can see the hills around us, but we can't always see the shape of the topography around us in the shape of relationships, for example. And yet, we talk about it and when we get in an argument with somebody we know when they cross the line and have gone into a new kind of topography. We think about our relationships and the way they work. Some people grew up in households where they were never quite sure of the topography and it was really tough. Other people grew up in homes where it was clear and it made it easier. I think God is trying to make it clear to us; there is a topography and he will lead us through it like the good shepherd.

So we get to go to green pastures and still waters. The only problem is, I don't really like grass. We recognize that it's a metaphor, isn't it? We at least need to take the product of that grass and turn it into something edible. But even then, remember what Jesus says in response to his temptation? We don't live by bread alone.

So as we think about this wonderful God coming in Christ to show us the way, to invite us into relationship, it's really more than finding a real green pasture. We have to begin to recognize what that green pasture is. One of the things we do is to begin to listen to the voice of the one who leads us. In the passage, it talks about the sheep following the voice of the Good Shepherd because they know him. So we have to know the Good Shepherd enough to trust his voice and to follow. Think about what that means.

In 1st Peter, it suggests that it's living for righteousness. As you know, I always translate righteousness as being in right relationship. So it's living into right relationships; leading us into right relationships. So when we have right relationship, perhaps that's when we have the green pastures and still waters. There are those dark valleys, as well, but we usually don't want to think about those.

There's a lot of topography. It's the way the world works. He's inviting us to hear his voice and to live into righteousness, right relationships. The world sometimes isn't that helpful. I often think it would be really easy to do what was right if doing what was right was always easy to do. It's an opportunity, though, to follow him through even the darkest valleys, and in that experience, to know and begin to find out how much we really are being fed the things we really need—the green pastures and still waters. But

still, that's a little abstract, idyllic even, just the thought of these wonderful green valleys and still waters. But I think we can look and see what the very people who followed Jesus first saw him teaching them. How they heard his voice calling them and what they did. So there are really four things in our Acts passage today that it talks about that they did.

First, there was the teaching of the apostles. I'm assuming that if there was teaching, there was also learning. There's that process of learning and teaching together, going deeper into what Christ has said, learning what we don't already know, finding our way in ways that only teaching can do. We can learn as we go along. At least, I'm one who believes we can. Some people say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but I think as human beings we can always learn more, find a greater experience of what Christ is teaching. That was the first thing.

The second is fellowship. That's the Greek word *koinonia*. It means living in mutual relationship. So he's inviting us to become a community. That's exactly what the disciples did. They gathered together. They cared for one another. They created a fellowship. That's what we do at church, we want to develop a fellowship where we can learn and where we can enjoy living together, sharing our lives, caring for one another.

Then, they broke bread together. What do you think about when we talk about breaking bread? Last week, we had communion. We broke bread together. I think it's about that sacramental experience. Why do we have a sacrament to break bread together? It's a way of remembering God's actual presence with us, knowing God is there to nourish us, to love us, to wrap God's grace around us. It's a way of worship.

The final thing they did was pray, to stay in that relationship with God through prayer. I think they had learned from Christ the right paths, and it's interesting that those right paths—the gathering together, the learning, the fellowship, the worship, the sacramental experience together, and prayer—as we do those, as we live out those right paths, I think they also become green pastures and still waters. They become that which we carry with us even when we go through the valley of the shadow of death.

God may not be easy to see, not in the abstract anyway, but God has come to us in Jesus Christ, to call us, to care for us, to lead us into life—life abundant. Amen.

Let's pray:

Lord, sometimes this world does seem a little crazy and we do have a hard time remembering your presence. Thank you for giving us Jesus and for inviting us to know you through some pretty concrete things: through the learning and teaching we can do, through the fellowship we share, through the breaking of bread together and the recognizing of your presence in the midst of it, and our time in prayer, both offering you prayer and listening to your encouragement and guidance. Lord, let us hear your voice and follow you that we might have life, life abundant. Amen.