

Take Care

By
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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

May 11, 2025

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

The evening news can be so bleak these days that I have noticed that the NBC Nightly News always ends with some kind of “good news story.” It’s often a glimpse into a local community coming together to help out someone in need; or a special child being cheered on by peers for an amazing accomplishment. When most nights, the first twenty-five minutes of news has included the terrors of ICE and DOGE, fears that bird-flu or the measles are spreading out of control, or one country’s hostility mounting into the bombing of its neighboring country, it’s a lovely gesture for the evening news to add a 90 second bit of good news. And on the occasion when I watch the NBC Evening News to the end, what I also find endearing is Lester Holt’s sign off: *Take care of yourself and each other.* That’s always his last word. Day in and day out, Monday through Friday, *Take care of yourself and each other.*

Both of our scripture readings today carry a similar sentiment, that comforting sense of God’s saying to us: *Take care.* The idiom expresses concern for the well-being of another in a holistic way. It articulates a genuine desire for another to be of good health, of good cheer, of staying safe and sound and free from danger. It’s God desire for us and all members of God’s human family, a nowhere is this intention expressed as artfully as in the biblical image of God as Shepherd.

I imagine most of us think of Psalm 23 as almost a stand alone word of comfort. But I’ve always found it interesting that this Psalm with its lush green pastures and clear flowing waters immediately follows one of the most agonizing prayers in the Bible – Psalm 22. *My God, my God why have you forsaken me; Why are you so far from helping me... O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer and by night, but find no rest.* Have you ever thought about that? How Jesus himself in the agony of crucifixion

quoted Psalm 22? And that cry of desperation is immediately followed by the gentleness of *The Lord is my Shepherd*... Holding these Psalms side by side – the bitter cry for help with the consolation of a guardian Shepherd – must be the Bible’s way of saying “all your prayers are covered...” And if you ever feel God-forsaken, a Good Shepherd is in pursuit, is searching for you, and will find you.

A long-time friend and pastoral colleague of mine, Rush Otey, put it this way: Wherever our souls have ventured – in loneliness we long for companionship; in fatigue we seek refreshment; in error we need correction; in terror we gasp, struggle to breath, and reach for reassurance; in challenges we hope for courage... All the days of our lives we are pursued by enemies, imaginary and all too real. And to one another we often say, *Take care*. By this we mean to encourage the well-being and peace of a friend or family member, to remind however gently that the road is rutted and rocky and there are perils in carelessness. Take care. Be filled with care. But there is another meaning of those two words, Rush Otey writes. “To take care is also to receive care, as one would take a vitamin or medicine. Psalm 23 is God’s saying to us, “Take care. Take my care because I love you. Whatever else you may be, you are loved. Receive what you need most, what you cannot do without me.”¹

You know, coming immediately after the agonizing cry of forsakenness in Psalm 22, Psalm 23 feels like a warm blanket and cup of tea, but Psalm 23 is also striking in its realism. No matter how it may play sentimental in our minds, here the enemies are real. The shadow of death does not disappear

¹ Rush Otey, “The Psalms of Easter,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2002, p. 9-11.

or fade with the sunrise. The valley is part of the landscape of every person's journey and of our corporate life together. Psalm 23 affirms that in the midst of evil, and fear, and an onslaught of enemies, the one sustaining truth is the broad welcoming, guiding, comforting presence of God.

Biblical scholar and Preaching Professor, Valerie Bridgeman tells a story about taking a walk with her young son in a city park in Austin, Texas. He had been memorizing Psalm 23, and while they were walking together he started practicing it. It was late in the day and dusk was approaching so the child added a word to his recitation. When he got to the phrase, *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*, the boy added the word "quickly".

His mother recalls: He had been running ahead of us, and because night was descending, some anxiety must have settled in because he seemed suddenly afraid. He began repeatedly saying *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... quickly, I will fear no evil*. He recited that one phrase mantra-like, his mother remembers, writing: "He had hit upon something that has stuck with me more than twenty years later. Fear descends when we cannot see where we are going or know what the dark shadows harbor. The darkness itself is not evil; it is merely the coming and going of the 24-hour-day. Night is as necessary as day. But we have been taught to fear what we cannot see, to fear the unknown in all its forms."²

There is a lot to fear these days, God knows. We are living in an unprecedented season in our country where civic leaders are often

² Valerie Bridgeman, "Fears Within and Without: Easter Preaching to the Fearful," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2019, p. 47.

misleading with lies, leading with cruelty, and reframing history that erases the realities of racism, and sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia that so desperately need still to be overcome. We are also living in a time when the Christian faith – in some quarters – is being aligned with a political ideology that is anything but Christian. When our Vice President said, “There is a Christian concept that you love your family and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens, and then after that, prioritize the rest of the world” the - about to be elected - Pope took him on and called out his theology as false and unbiblical. And so should we take care to understand the expanse of God’s sheepfold never creates a hierarchy of love.

You heard what Jesus says in today’s gospel. The Good Shepherd proclaims an expansive, inclusive and diverse following, a world which he was willing to die for. Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.

So there will be one flock, one shepherd... because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.” In this season of Eastertide we are called to assimilate the meaning of Christ’s taking up his life again, a living presence beside us, helping us to see the imaging of God in every human being; and helping us to take care of them, ourselves and each other.

On Mother’s Day many of us are mindful of our gratitude for mothers and people who have been like mothers to us, as well as the joy we have in extending that kind of fiercely protective and gentle love to others. However, amid the special gatherings, sending cards and flowers, we rarely recall the origins of Mother’s Day. Julia Ward Howe, is perhaps best known for writing the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and her work as an abolitionist to end slavery and bring peace to a divided country.

Horrified by the death and destruction she witnessed during the Civil War, she wrote the first Mother's Day Proclamation in 1870 saying in part:

“Arise all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of fears! Say firmly: We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says Disarm, Disarm!

The sword of murder is not the balance of justice... In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held... to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace.”

That was the first Mothers' Day Proclamation, and then a movement to make it a national holiday was taken up by Anna Jarvis in honor of mother, Anne. Anne Jarvis gave birth to twelve children most of whom died to measles and diphtheria, and out of her own sad experience she committed herself to improve the health and hygiene in West Virginia among the Native American and Appalachian poor. When the Civil War came she called women to attend to the wounded of both Union and Confederate troops.

So when we observe Mothers' Day, let us not forget that it began as a movement led by women of faith to enlarge God's fold. They enacted the gospel to affirm the full inclusion of diverse people, with a brave and

selfless promotion of peace – not just within a given family – but on behalf of the children of others in need. Down dark valleys of death and in the presence of enemies, the founders of Mothers' Day prepared a table to welcome all of God's children, to assure them that God's goodness and mercy pursued them all - no matter race, nationality, or creed. Jesus said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will know my voice."

It's God's voice saying to all of God's children everywhere – Take care. As I care for you. You take care of yourself and each other.

AMEN.