



**“The Good Shepherd”
Scripture – Psalm 23
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, April 17, 2016**

Several weeks into my seventh grade year (yes, I can still remember a few things from that far back), my mother convinced the school principal to switch me from one English class to Miss Penfield’s class – the teacher from hell. She was the most demanding teacher in the entire school. Nothing was ever good enough for her. Each time you turned in a paper it came back with red marks all over it. And she could have saved herself time if she had owned one of those old rubber stamps, because her final words on every paper you handed in were the same: “Rewrite it!”

Being in her class felt like punishment. I assumed she was an unhappy old lady – you know, about 50 years old! I thought she was an old grouch who thought her purpose in life was to torment kids. It was not until I hit high school that a new awareness dawned: all of us who had Miss Penfield were ahead of our peers in English thanks to her demanding nature.

While she was my teacher, I imagined her to be the most unreasonable person in the world. With time, I figured out that she was so hard on us because she could see our potential and refused to allow us to settle for less.

Can you think of someone – a teacher, a coach, a boss – who seemed demanding in the extreme, but pushed you further than you would have pushed yourself? Raise your hand if you ever had someone like that.

It may seem odd, but Miss Penfield came to mind as I was reflecting on the 23rd Psalm. Generally, when we read this psalm, we concentrate on how God comforts us during times of trial. I often read it at bedside when someone is in the process of dying and to mourners who grieve the death of a loved one. It contains that supportive and reassuring line: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.”

Life can be grisly. Life can be a struggle. There are times when the light is snuffed out and we can no longer envision a future. The 23rd Psalm carries us through harsh days by declaring that we are not alone; God is with us. God will give us strength to survive our trials, and God will not abandon us. Many people have survived desperate times because they trusted these words.

The psalmist reveals the character of God by drawing a comparison to a good shepherd who genuinely cares for his flock. This is not a shepherd who does the bare minimum of keeping the flock fed and out of danger, but a shepherd who truly cares about each individual sheep.

This is a central thrust of the 23rd Psalm, but there is another part of the psalm we overlook. The psalmist says, “God leads me in right paths,” or as the King James reads: “paths of righteousness.” The psalmist declares that God shows us the right path to take in life.

Parents fear their child will take a path that leads to disaster. He could take a path that leads to an addiction. She could take a path that leads to an abusive relationship. He could take a path that leads to a totally materialistic and unsatisfying life. The Good Shepherd can lead us to the *right* paths. Paths marked by honesty, kindness, and generosity. Paths encouraging us to treat others with respect, to help people in need, and to work for peace.

How does the Good Shepherd lead us to the right paths? The psalmist says, “Your rod and your staff comfort me.” That is, your rod and your staff reassure me of your guidance. The rod and staff were two names that often stood for the shepherd’s crook. The shepherd used it like a walking stick and it provided something for them to lean on.

The shepherd also used it like a large hook. If a lamb was beginning to stray, the shepherd could hook its neck and pull it back so to head in the right direction.

The rod – the long straight part of the staff – was used for protection, especially fighting off a wild animal. But, the rod was also a symbol of correction and discipline. The well-known saying, “Spare the rod, spoil the child” is based on the saying in the Book of Proverbs: “Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.”

If a shepherd saw a sheep heading for danger, he would use the staff to pull it back. But sheep can be stubborn. They can keep turning in the wrong direction. Eventually the shepherd has to become more aggressive. He must poke the sheep with the rod. He will not injure the sheep, but he will definitely make it feel uncomfortable if it persists in going the wrong direction. It hurts to get prodded, but it is for the good of the sheep.

I now see that Miss Penfield was a prodding shepherd. She wanted us to work harder, to climb higher, and to achieve all we could – so she used a rod; in her case, a demanding attitude backed up by a bright red pen.

Isn’t the same also true of God? God loves us and sometimes that love is expressed by comfort, support, and forgiveness. At other times it is expressed by pushing and prodding and challenging us. God sees our full potential; God envisions a world where the hungry are fed, the oppressed are freed, and adversaries live together in peace; and God challenges us to work toward that better world.

In 2009, Camilla and I led a group from Westminster to Israel and the West Bank. It was our first time to walk where Jesus walked. It was thrilling to see Nazareth, Bethlehem, the Jordan River, the Old City of Jerusalem, and so much more. But it was also upsetting to see the simmering conflict between Jews and Palestinians.

When we returned home, God kept gnawing on my conscience about the disturbing injustices and the disastrous future for the state of Israel if the policies of its current government continue. I shared my experience with you and others, led adult classes on the current situation, showed numerous films and continued to deepen my understanding of the situation.

It would have been far easier to give up on it and focus elsewhere. It is not a popular topic. But, God kept pushing and prodding.

Along with several other Protestant ministers who were also feeling the Shepherd’s rod jabbing them in the side, we met with the local Jewish rabbis to discuss our concerns. Within a few months, the idea of the *Peace Drums*

Project was born – a steel drum band comprised of Jewish, Christian and Muslim youth in I/P. We could not see the end of the road and we still cannot see where it may lead, but something powerful and inspiring is happening.

More and more people are beginning to understand the significance of the *Peace Drums Project*. The groundswell has begun. Many of you have joined this peacemaking effort. Many of you have contributed financially, over 100 of you have attended a concert, some of you have prepared food for our guests, and several of our families are hosting the youth and adults. All of these add up.

Yesterday morning, in a strategy session, we asked why these children chose to be in the band. One of the Jewish mothers who is traveling with the band said that playing music was the main reason the children became interested in the band. But the main reason the parents wanted their children in the band was to become acquainted with the “other” – the people from the other religions; the people, they are frequently told, who are their enemy.

Here’s how the *Peace Drums Project* works. The children rehearse in their own schools and then once a month, the children from one school travel to the other where they combine as one large band. They learn together, they play music together, and they have begun to build friendships.

Last October, when they first discussed the possibility of the combined band coming to the U.S., all the parents of the children held a meeting together for the first time. Harvey Price explained the idea of a concert tour in the U.S., fielded a few questions and then took all of the children to another room to practice for over an hour. The parents had to talk about it among themselves.

When Harvey returned, one of the leaders from the Palestinian school ran up to him and said a miracle had occurred. A miracle?

Yes. Fears and stereotypes had vanished and the parents had conversations as never before. Both sets of parents were amazed to learn that they had many of the same dreams for their children. They began to realize that the “other” was much more similar to themselves than they ever imagined.

A few weeks ago, to prepare for coming to the U.S. for their concert tour, the bands from the two schools – the children, their parents and their instructors – had a 48-hour retreat in which they ate, slept and played together for two straight days. It was an amazing experience that brought all of them closer together than ever.

Last Sunday, they flew from Israel to JFK airport. They have had two large welcome dinners – one here at Westminster and one at Congregation Beth Shalom. They have played four concerts, appeared on “Good Day Philadelphia,” had a press conference with Mayor Kenny in Philadelphia’s City Hall, spent a day in New York City, and tomorrow will tour the U.S. Capitol. They have worked hard together loading and unloading the steel drums, they have made wonderful music together and been an inspiration to many.

There have been a number of memorable moments. I’d like to tell you about one of them. On Thursday, the *Peace Drums* Band played a concert in a synagogue in Mount Kisco, New York. The band was staying over one night, so the synagogue found host families for the children in the band and the adults traveling with them. One of the Jewish families was recruited at the last minute, but they opened their home and had a nice dinner waiting after the late afternoon concert.

University of Delaware professor Harvey Price, who is the leader of the project and the chief instructor of the band, was staying in the home of this Jewish family, along with Samar, the music instructor at the Palestinian school, and her husband. Harvey said they were 45 minutes into dinner and conversation before the host family realized that Samar and her husband were not Jewish, but Palestinian Christians. The look on the faces of the host

family was priceless. It was the first time this Jewish family had Palestinians as guests at their table, much less sleeping overnight in their home.

Preconceived notions crumbled in a matter of moments as this Jewish family suddenly saw Palestinians as human beings with whom they could build a friendship. That is what the *Peace Drums Project* is all about: people of different faiths getting to know each other and spreading peace one friendship at a time.

The Good Shepherd both comforts us and prods us, because we can achieve a great deal more than we can imagine. But, remember, we only have one brief lifetime to accept the challenge.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Loving God – you are the good shepherd. You make us lie down in green pastures, and lead us beside still waters. You comfort us when we wander life’s dark valleys and welcome us to the feast of grace. We give thanks for your faithfulness to us...though we are wont to go astray, you chase after us and call us back to you. Gather us in this day and surround us with your mercy, that we might find rest in your loving embrace.

God, some of us are weary and overburdened, and long for respite and renewal. Some of us are anxious in the face of uncertainty, and seek your assurance and peace. Some of us are searching for a sense of purpose, and crave your guidance. Some of us carry hurts that we do not understand and cannot begin to name. You, O God, know the concerns of our hearts...you know our brokenness, you know our pain, you know the ways in which we need your tender care. Attend to them, we pray. Surround us with your love, and shepherd us toward healing and wholeness.

With you beside us, we have nothing to fear. You are our guardian and guide, our refuge, our strength – a very-present help in trouble. May your presence embolden us, O God. Help us *not* to cower away from the dark valleys of this world, but to traverse them with courage that is born of faith. When we see suffering, stir our hearts toward compassion. When we see injustice, make us thirst for righteousness. When we become complacent with the way things are, prod us toward right paths that lead to peace. Shepherd us through these valleys, O God, that we may bring comfort and hope to others.

We pray rejoicing in your abiding presence, which has sustained us through all generations. So we join our voices with the faithful of every time and place to offer the prayer that binds us together: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.”