

"An Open Hand"

NT: John 10:1-10

OT: Psalm 23

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; Your rode and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Toward the end of the message last week I shared a reflection on the meaning and importance of an open hand. More specifically I emphasized the church's need and call, our need and call, to be both supported and supporting. (With palms down) We are not created helpless with the need to be fully supported and as much as we might try, despite our greatest efforts, (With palms up) we are not created omnipotent and able to always be supporting. (With one palm down and the other up) There is a balance and that is where we need to be: both supported and supporting.

To bookend the message was God's promise in Jeremiah 29:11: "For surely I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "Plans for welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." Today, I want to continue with this promise and how God works to fulfill it.

I believe in God's promise and I believe in God's ability to fulfill it for you and for me. And I believe that there are at least two things required of us to help God in that endeavor.

The first is what we unpacked last week with three invitational words: "lean on me". To lean on God, because God is the most reliable source of strength and wisdom and power, as often and much as we can possibly lean. On top of that, it is God's desire for us to lean on God and depend. And to lean on one another as the church called to embody life as instruments of God's love and light. However, leaning is only part of how the Lord will work in fulfilling the promise. Again, we are not meant to just lean, go limp, and wait for God to do all the work. Even though I believe God can accomplish things despite our efforts, scripture reveals that just is not how God works. God is not just going to do everything for us. God gives us a role and the talent and skills to be useful along the way.

The second is that we are to take the open hand of Christ and allow his example and power to lead us into our future with hope. Life is a journey that requires movement and dare I say adventure. Amidst our journey there will be ups and downs, ins and outs, celebrations and concerns. In these sometimes unnerving and unsettling movements, we need someone who is strong and dependable not only when we are standing still, but when we begin and continue taking steps forward. All of us need a leader worth following in our life, but not just anyone suffices in helping fulfill God's promise of welfare and a future with hope. We need THE one who created the heavens and the earth, placed the stars, gave us breath and life, sustains life, and redeems to salvation all those who believe and follow faithfully. We need THE one who can save us from ourselves even when we do not know we need saving and THE one who can be our all in all. We need THE one who is willing to turn over tables in the temple, turn water into wine, walk on water, feed thousands with just a little, heal the blind, help the lame walk again, calls children to come to him, eats at the table of sinners, stands up to corruption, and rises to new life from death. I do not know about you, but Jesus is THE leader I want to follow and walk with. Think about it, there is no one with a better track record.

Jesus, God's son, the messiah, embodies every necessary characteristic of a successful leader. There is a book by Kenneth Boa entitled "The Perfect Leader: Practicing the Leadership Traits of God" that has become a great tool for me in teaching and learning about successful leadership. Included as characteristics are Integrity, Character, Values, Purpose and Passion, Humility, Commitment, Vision Casting, Innovation, Decision Making, Problem Solving, Team Building, Communication, Encouragement, Exhortation, Building Relationships and Servant Leadership. Now, just think about how many of these characteristics an open hand applies to. All of them in one way or another.

Almost all of Jesus' life exemplifies leadership, but one of the images portrayed as a perfect match for Christ was that of the good shepherd. One of his seven bold declarations in John is "I AM the Good Shepherd." Why was this image so important? A shepherd was strong and empathetic toward his flock. A shepherd was careful to tend to all the sheep and when necessary, went out to look for even one that might be missing. A shepherd protects and guides and mentors. A shepherd serves the sheep before himself, even if to the point of death. Christ is our good shepherd escorting us into our future with hope. Christ's hand is outstretched in our direction. Will we follow? Will we take the Lord's hand, and allow him to take ours, so we can go where he leads?

"Precious Lord, Take My Hand" is a hymn written by Thomas Dorsey in 1932 with music by George Allen. The lyrics of this hymn call out to the Lord for guidance and strength through difficult times. As Dorsey experienced tragedy in his life, he turned to God for hope and faith. May this hymn help you through difficult times to trust in God.

*Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light: Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me home.*

*When my way grows drear, Precious Lord, linger near,
When my life is almost gone, Hear my cry, hear my call,
Hold my hand lest I fall: Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me home.*

*When the darkness appears And the night draws near,
And the day is past and gone, At the river, I stand,
Guide my feet, hold my hand: Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me home.*

Psalm 23, in all its familiarity, speaks to what Max Lucado calls “Traveling Light.” His reference is that all of us are carrying things with us on our life journey. Psalm 23 works as a prayerful remedy to all the unnecessarily heavy burdens we stuff in our packs along the way.

Because the Lord is my shepherd...

- the burden of self-reliance is dealt with as it becomes Christ’s way that matters most.
- the burden of discontent is broken as we are released from our prison of want.
- the burden of weariness is lifted as we are given rest in green pastures.
- the burden of worry is calmed as we are led to still waters.
- the burden of hopelessness is delivered as we are rescued and restored.
- the burden of guilt is atoned for God is righteous and just.
- the burden of arrogance is replaced as we turn our focus on Christ.
- the burden of the grave is defeated as we are promised a heavenly home.
- the burden of grief is comforted through mourning and meekness.
- the burden of fear is matched as Christ turns panic into peace.
- the burden of loneliness is filled as Christ comes alongside us.
- the burden of shame is digested by an encounter to break bread even with those you have betrayed or have betrayed you.
- the burden of disappointment is healed as we are chosen and anointed by Christ.
- the burden of envy is outmatched as Christ overflows with generosity, mercy, and love.
- the burden of doubt is overturned as God’s promises of goodness and mercy follow us.
- the burden of homesickness is sustained as the hope and faith of our eternal home is prepared and established.

I do not know how many of these burdens have or are plaguing you, but I do hope you will allow Jesus to be your good shepherd in leading you out of the burden-stricken swamp. I believe that in the stickiest of situations, Jesus’ hand is the best to take hold of. Why?

Christ’s hand is the right hand to reach out and take because of three reasons.

Christ's hand reaches wide, wider than Mr. Gadget's go, go, gadget fingers. Just as the Lord's table transcends time and space and makes room for all those who trust and believe in him, there is room for your hand, and your hand, and my hand in Christ's.

This makes me think of the familiar song, "He's Got the Whole World in His hands." God's got the itty-bitty babies in His hands. God's got you and me brother in His hands. God's got you and me sister in His hands. God's got the whole world in His hands.

How does God do it? I do not know exactly. I can only hold 4 baseballs in my palm. That is why God is God and I am not. I just want to make sure my hand is within.

Christ's hand is both soft and strong. Whether we are in need of a soft place to land and gentle touch of comfort or stern point in the right direction and push or pull to get us off our hind ends, God's hand is perfect for whatever we need at whatever time we need it.

Christ has the strength and endurance to never let go. The storyline of the bible is about the relationship between God and humanity and at no point, does God ever let go, give up, and stop searching when humanity has moved away. God is saddened I think but God does not give up. You see, our grip will weaken and there will come a point when we do not have the strength to hold on any longer. We will begin to give up, but when we keep Christ close, we will feel Christ's power prevail.

Makes me think of an action movie where someone is leaping across a canyon, or from one roof top to the other, or someone falls and hangs off a cliff with nothing but their fingertips. Hollywood has done a good job with their angles and dramatic effects, but I do believe life is really that way sometimes. Have you ever noticed that in the rescue, it is an open hand that reaches out to catch hold or grab on to pull up? Just when the last finger is about to slip, and sometimes it does slip, the hand of hero, usually someone who loves them, latches on.

We currently live and participate in the most pluralistic culture in history. It seems we have an endless list of possibilities, opportunities, and novelties. And I think we have gotten pretty darn good at being involved with as many as we possibly can. The last 40- 50 days aside maybe. In our involvement with our many activities, we come to reach our hands out to more and more people. We have established a network of hands to reach out to like our parents, siblings, friends, bosses, neighbors, coaches, teachers, doctors, fellow church members. We have even built, as we have been able, a network of symbolic hands to reach out to: financial gain, work, food, exercise, sports, a night out, travel, recognition, volunteering...? Each of these is valuable and important. How fortunate we are to have so many hands to reach out to when we need it?

Here is the question, or questions, this morning: Where is Christ's hand in that mix for you? Do you only reach out to Christ's hand when the others are not there? Do you only reach out to Christ's hand when things are big enough, they seem more than the others can handle? Do you ever reach out to Christ's hand or are you one who just hopes Christ's hand will swoop in at the right time despite your attention, action, affiliation, or affection of Christ?

How we respond to our current circumstances amidst this pandemic will matter. I do not believe going back to the way things were before is very realistic. And we can either be better for it or suffer the struggle of fighting an uphill battle. Not with everything mind you, but certainly with many things. Even here at the church. There is going to be a new way of thinking and being to consider. What are those things that will change in our lives and with church? Only God knows exactly at this time, but I pray we are all willing to put our hands together with Christ's and allow Christ to shepherd and lead us.

Once a little girl and her father were crossing a bridge. The father was kind of scared so he asked his little daughter, "Sweetheart, please hold my hand so that you don't fall into the river."

The little girl said, "No, Dad. You hold my hand."

"What's the difference?" asked the puzzle father.

"There's a big difference," replied the little girl.

"If I hold your hand and something happens to me, chances are that I may let your hand go. But if you hold my hand, I know for sure that no matter what happens, you will never let my hand go."

Christ, the good shepherd, the way, the truth, and the life, is reaching out an open hand saying, "Take my hand and let me guide you to the most beautiful places, the most nourishing sources, the most glorious life you have yet to imagine; to welfare and a future with hope."

An open hand clasped with another is a bond, a friendship, a partnership, a responsibility, an honor, a privilege, an image of communion, an image of together.

Let all God's people say... Amen.