

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 25 APRIL 2010

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

John 10: 22-30

“The Power of Shepherding Love”

1. Being shepherded in anxiety's unsettling influence

Steve Lopez, in a deeply dark moment of present failure, recounts his first mistake to his former partner, Mary. He is on the verge of tears. His first mistake, he laments, was that he did not leave a country in 1984 when an earthquake struck, when they were together with their nine-year old son on a journalist assignment. A terror at 4am. Why didn't he act differently then? Now he turns to his present despair.

I thought I was helping someone! There is a guy! He's got a gift! He's lost his way... [all my efforts at helping him] inevitably backfired!

And the very person to whom I provided some redeeming service turned on me. I'm the enemy... I can't see any outcome to support a belief in anything worthwhile. (Tears begin to flow).

I've done trying. I resign, I resign, from everything!

Steve sounds like Peter in our reading last week, when Peter gives up and goes back fishing after Jesus is crucified!

Steve Lopez wrote a popular column for the *LA Times* in the 1990s, and his story is told in the movie, *The Soloist*. It's about his meeting a homeless man with mental challenges.

Washington Post journalist Ann Hornaday introduces this movie with these words:

[Robert] Downey [Jr] plays *Los Angeles Times* columnist Steve Lopez, who, always looking to feed the beast that is a regular column, happens upon Nathaniel Ayers (Jamie Foxx) in downtown Los Angeles's Pershing Square, playing a dilapidated violin missing all but two strings. Lopez discovers that Ayers once attended [New York's Juilliard School 30 years earlier], and his resulting articles wind up taking the writer not only into the tortured history and mind of his subject, but also into the Hieronymus Bosch-like world of the city's Skid Row [where the homeless live]. They also capture the imagination of the city, whose denizens respond to Ayers's story with concern and generosity (one woman sends him a beautiful cello) and whose leaders embark on a self-congratulatory campaign to clean up Ayers's neighborhood.[\[1\]](#)

At first, Steve leaves no stone unturned in his effort to enable Nathaniel to lead a new life. He writes many stories about him, he visits him, finds him a cello, lobbies the Mayor to change the condition of the homeless, takes him to concerts, finds him a flat, and then Nathaniel regresses and Steve is physically attacked!

So, in the scene I just shared with you, he responds to this chaos with despair. The anxiety of the

situation drives him to resignation and distancing. As I said last week, *distancing is actually a way of managing intense feelings*.^[2] He has moved from intense *overfunctioning* to *distancing*. So what is it that produces his resignation, the situation or his lack of an adequate “self”? Harriet Lerner would say he needs to move “toward more self”!

I agree, and will add insights from a theological and biblical perspective from our readings today, Psalm 23 and John 10: 22-30. And, as we listen to Steve’s story and the biblical stories, we can listen and discern what this means for our own faith and our sense of self.

2. Shepherding in life’s challenges

Psalm 23 is the best known of the psalms. We may associate it as belonging primarily with funerals. Yet it is a shepherding psalm containing powerful images of God’s unseen, companioning presence with us in life’s most difficult moments. As Bruce Epperly expresses it:

The words of the Psalm invite us to trust that God will be our companion, providing healing presence even when there cannot be a cure. There are no guarantees that persons of faith will avoid suffering and failure....

At times, we must “hope against hope” that God is with us as we face ... chronic illness, and death. We may need to trust God’s care and the faith of a community when we have no faith of our own.^[3]

Howard Wallace notes that in this psalm, the psalmist relates to God in a personal and intimate way, a trust that whatever life delivers, God accompanies us.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When bad things happen to good people*, said in an interview that Psalm 23 is the answer to the question, "How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?"^[4] He shared that what inspired him to write his book was the death of his son, who was 14 years old and was born with an incurable illness. He said:

Where did we find the strength and the ability to raise him, to comfort him when he was sick and scared, and ultimately to lose him? And the only answer is, when we used up all of our own strength and love and faith, there really is a God, and [God] replenishes your love and your strength and your faith.

The Psalm inspired his faith. And in a true Rabbinical, dialectical fashion, inspired not just pious affirmation to trust God, but he implicitly suggests that when God shepherds you then you are truly empowered when you shepherd others.

On the one hand, he said,

The role of God is not to explain and not to justify but to comfort, to find people when they are living in darkness, take them by the hand, and show them how to find their way into the sunlight again.

Then, on the other hand, he deals with why people get stuck and guilty, and in this way, empowered by his own faith, he deals with the self, the inner life and anxieties of people in despair and resignation.

We can never separate theology and psychology, or as we will see politics!

In our story in John 10: 22-30, we need to ask why John's Jesus connects his being the shepherd of his followers with the Messiah. Ezekiel 34 combines the two notions. He images the shepherd messiah as the One who would treat people differently to the political leaders of his day. As William Loader reminds us:

Shepherding was a big metaphor which could encompass the vision of the reign of God with the full range of political, social, and personal dimensions which that entails. It is much bigger than 'pastoral' care, understood often in a very limited sense without the wider dimensions.[\[5\]](#)

3. Shepherding, a dis-turbingly more robust notion!

If the Living Risen Spirit of Christ continues a shepherding presence in this larger way, we could say that this Spirit urges us to work radically, inspiring us to work for the common good and to keep our political and institutional systems honest and genuine. This would certainly require a larger and more robust notion of God, Jesus and our growth towards more self.

William Loader further suggests that this power struggle with some of the Jews, which we see in our text, is happening in John's church.

It is a power struggle for leadership of God's flock. Something terrible has happened. The flock has not responded; only some have recognised the hidden messiah, the true shepherd. And even that flock is being dissipated by dissent.[\[6\]](#)

This also suggests evidence of anxiety and the necessity of dealing with intense feelings, and thus, working to create more of a self, as Lerner articulates it. And what does he mean?

Harriet Lerner writes that,

We move up on the selfhood scale (and the intimacy scale...) when we are able to:

- present a balanced picture of both our strengths and our vulnerabilities.
- make clear statements of our beliefs, values and priorities, and then keep our behaviour congruent with these.
- stay emotionally connected to significant others even when things get pretty intense.
- address difficult and painful issues and take a position on matters important to us.
- state our differences and allow others to do the same.[\[7\]](#)

The church needed to work at selfhood, both personal and institutional.

Stated christologically John's Jesus replied to those who doubted he is the shepherd Messiah:

"The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I provide them with real life."

And part of real life, of listening and hearing the unseen shepherd of life, is the power and patience

to engage with real life. This is resurrection life, to live and love, and work to make human life more human, together, even when anxiety and sameness remain.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, we return to our story about Steve Lopez. We only grow in more self as we share our self with others. Where does he share his despair and resignation? With his friend and former partner!

When he tearfully shares his anguish, Mary responds! Not by fixing him up, or telling him he has done a great job. Her replies runs like this, gently:

You couldn't stop the earthquake! You can't fix LA! You're never going to cure Nathaniel!
Just be his friend and show up!

Then the film cuts and we find Steve and Nathaniel at a concert together, and Steve's monologue concludes the film:

A year ago I met a man who was down on his luck and I thought I was able to help him. I don't know that I have! Yes, he sleeps inside, has a key, has a bed, but his mental state and his well-being are as precarious now as the day we met! There are people that tell me I've helped him, mental health experts who say that the simple act of being someone's friend can change their brain chemistry and improve their functioning in the world... I can't speak for Mr Ayers in that regard...

... I can, however, speak for myself. I can tell you that by witnessing Mr Ayer's courage, his humility, his faith and the power of his art, I've learnt the dignity of being loyal to something you believe in, holding on to it, above all else, believing without question that it will carry you home.

Where else can we begin to sense the presence of the invisible shepherding of risen life but in such loyalty to struggling humanity, of the homeless, who by the way have their own dignity and strength. Shepherding is evidenced in moving up the selfhood scale and not being stuck in avoidance, distancing, or overfunctioning.

The endnotes of the film remind us that there are 90,000 homeless people on the streets of LA. Ezekiel spoke up for these people a long time ago!

Are we middle class people listening?

[1] Ann Hornaday, *Two-Part Symphony*, Washington Post Staff Writer, Friday, April 24, 2009: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/23/AR2009042304516_pf.html

[2] Harriet G Lerner, *The Dance of Intimacy*, 34.

[3] Bruce Epperly, Easter 4, Ps 23, <http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010/2010-04-25.shtml>

[4] Psalm 23, November 26, 2004, Episode no. 813
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week813/feature.html>

[5] William Loader, Easter 4, 25 April, John 10:22-30,
<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkEaster4.htm>

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Op Cit.*