

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Lord is Our Shepherd: A Safe Space”
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Psalm 23; Matthew 6:25-33

Bibles and hymnals were flying from the pews. People were running from the front of the sanctuary. It was not your typical ending to an annual congregational meeting. Yet it took place at a church in our presbytery last year. What were they doing? They were engaged in an active shooter drill. What this means is that they were practicing what they should do if someone came into their church and began shooting. While this may seem a bit strange, it is now standard operating procedure for many congregations. Following the shootings in Charlottesville and Sand Springs, Texas, churches have begun preparing for such an event. Some churches have created their own police forces...yes with people wandering their campuses with concealed weapons. Others lock their doors as soon as services begin...which seems odd for us Presbyterians since most of us arrive at five minutes after the service has begun. Many others, including our church, have consulted with local police departments to explore options. But I have to say, there is always a part of me that wonders why we are so obsessed with this fear. I say that because of statistics. Here's what I mean in two simple statistics. The odds of being struck by lightning...1 in 700,000. The odds of being hit by a bullet in church...1 in 6.5 million. In other words, you are ten times more likely to be hit by lightning than a bullet in church. So again, why are we so anxious about this? Because we are anxious people living in anxious times. And if anyone could understand this...it is sheep.

I realize that this may seem a bit strange because if you are like me, your image of sheep was of these calm, cool and collected animals, just chilling in the pastures. Yet if sheep were able to talk I think all we would hear would be, “Dude I feel your anxiety.” You may ask then, why are sheep anxious? They are anxious because they are completely vulnerable. They are slow. They have no sharp pointy teeth or claws on their hooves. They make for a great meal and they have predators all around them that would like to have them for dinner...literally for dinner. What this means is that sheep are always on alert. They are always listening to the slightest rustle in the grass, watching for the slightest movement on the horizon, seldom even willing to lie down because they are not sure what might happen next, and fearful of rapidly running water because they might get swept away. In other words, they are anxious animals who react without thought or reason, which is something that they share with us. And it is into that reality that the Psalmist comes to talk about the shepherd.

The role of the shepherd is multifaceted. But one of his or her greatest roles is to give the sheep a safe place; a safe place in which they can lie down, catch their breath and set aside their fear and anxiety. This is what the Psalmist is describing in these words, “He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.” The Shepherd is the one who provides that safe place where the sheep can lie down, feed on green grass and not be afraid. The Shepherd is the one who provides a safe place with calm waters where the sheep can drink and not be afraid of being swept away or startled by the roaring river. The Shepherd is the one who provides a safe place where the ninety-nine

sheep from last week's story, can be left in safety while the shepherd goes and searches for the other sheep. This is what God the Shepherd does as well. God is the one who provides a safe place for God's people where they can leave their fears and anxieties behind them and restore their souls, even where there are dangers all around them.

It is this belief and affirmation of faith, that God can and does give a safe space, that is at the heart of Jesus' message from the Sermon on the Mount. I say this because when Jesus tells the people not to be anxious, he is not telling them to use the power of positive thinking to create some new reality. He is not telling them to ignore the realities of life and live in some fictional reality in which there are no cares or concerns. Jesus is fully aware of the difficulties of life. He knows that there is oppression and onerous taxation. He knows that drought and famine could always be around the corner. He knows that war is brewing with the Romans that will take the lives of many of God's people. Instead he tells them not to be anxious because God is present creating a safe space for them. Rather than using the image of shepherd and sheep, Jesus uses the image of creator and creature. If God cares about the lilies of the field will not God care about God's people, God's sheep? If God cares about the birds of the air, will not God care about God's people, God's sheep? Jesus' message is rooted and grounded not only in the 23rd Psalm but in the story of God's people, where God led God's people out of captivity, gave them a land and protected them in it, by giving them a safe space.

This morning then we have a choice to make. We can either be those who arrive every Sunday, grab hold of our Bibles and hymnals, scan the area around us, ready to fight or flee...or we can come into this place, into this sanctuary and experience the presence of God and the safe space that God creates. My friends, I hope that we choose the latter; that we choose the latter not because there are no bad people in the world; not because there is no danger out there. But I hope we choose it because in this sanctuary, God is present. The great shepherd of the sheep is here and is creating for us a safe space in which we can restore our souls; something that in this anxious world is desperately needed. So this morning here is what I would like you to do...close your eyes, and then slowly breathe in...breathe out. Breathe in...breathe out. And feel God's presence in this place. Feel God creating a safe place for you and then allow your soul to be restored. Amen.