

John 10:10b-18

Green Pastures

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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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“[Jesus said] I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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.”

For the Word of God in scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us:
Thanks be to God.

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When I was a teenager, our house in Greensboro, North Carolina had a big back yard with a pin oak tree and a lot of grass that my brother and I had the privilege of mowing. On clear, summer days when it wasn't too humid, I loved to lie on my back on the grass and just look at the sky. Even at that age, I had a restless mind that was always leaping from thought to thought, and cluttered with things to do and problems to solve, so when I lay on the grass, I always picked a spot where no tree branches extended into view—a spot from which I could see only sky. I would

sink into the soft green, and gaze up at the deep blue, and it was as though my mind was rinsed clean and my whole inner skull was painted a calm, robin's egg blue. In those moments, I felt at rest. There was nothing I needed to worry about, nothing I needed to do, nothing I needed, at all. Just deep, restful peace.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on this fourth Sunday of Easter, the lectionary readings include one of the passages in John in which Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, and the Twenty-Third Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd." When I planned this service before I left for a week away, I intended to preach on the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. But coming back, all I could think about was the psalm, and especially that one verse: "He makes me lie down in green pastures." That sounds like where we are today—in that green pasture.

This has been a long year. A year of fear and struggle and striving for much-needed change. We have truly walked through the Valley of the Shadow of Death with a pandemic that decimated Americans and people all over the world. We saw, on video, as George Floyd had the life choked out of him, and heard of so many other deaths—Ahmaud Arbury, Breonna Taylor, and the list keeps growing.

We feared for our children, and how the isolation and attempts at virtual learning would affect them in the long term; we saw the effects of Climate Change hammering the world with ever-increasing intensity of hurricanes and tornadoes and wildfires; we saw White Supremacist thought normalized and White Supremacist violence hailed as patriotism; and we've seen mass shootings become a daily—*daily*—occurrence nationwide. And we've done our best to respond.

We've denied ourselves the comfort of in-person worship in order to protect one another. We've immersed ourselves in study so that we could have a deeper understanding of the injustices in the world, and we've protested those injustices in-person and through phone calls and letters and emails to lawmakers. We've gone to great lengths in order to be able to vote, and to ensure that others are able to vote. We became a Matthew 25 Congregation, committing ourselves to building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eliminating systemic poverty. We've begun changing some of the images in our windows in order to tell a truer and more-inclusive Gospel. We've given our time and we've given our money both as a congregation and as individuals in order to try to ease the suffering of others. Together with the rest of our presbytery, we raised enough money to relieve nearly ten million dollars of medical debt in the Black Belt of Alabama—that was nearly double the original goal. And many of you have done

so many other acts of direct aid to others—driving people to vote or to get vaccinated, tutoring young people over Zoom, taking meals to First Light, and so many other things.

This year has been a journey like none I've ever been on, responding to crisis after crisis after crisis. It felt like we could never breathe. And the journey isn't over.

But today is Good Shepherd Sunday, in which our passages talk, not about what *we* need to do, but about what *God* does *for* us. A Good Shepherd who lays down his life to draw all people into abundant life. A Good Shepherd who not only walks with us through the dark valley, who not only sets a table for us even when we are surrounded by enemies, but who makes us lie down in green pastures. A shepherd who restores our souls.

This past week, three things happened that restore my soul. On Tuesday, George Floyd's killer was convicted. It's like suddenly, we can breathe again.

On Thursday, Earth Day, the United States went from being a nation that denied Climate Change to one that pledged to lead the world in carbon reduction. It's like suddenly, we can hope again.

And today, with Covid numbers dropping and vaccination rates increasing, we are finally able to be together in our sanctuary again.

Green pastures, indeed.

Recently, Francis Rushton said that one of the things he appreciates about this church is that the sermons almost always include a call to action. That's become part of the DNA of this congregation, with its deep commitment to social justice. But today, I want to do something different. I want to call you to *inaction*.

We have journeyed through the wilderness, and God will call us to do so, again. The inequities that the pandemic highlighted haven't gone away; and just because Derek Chauvin was convicted doesn't mean that systemic racism is a thing of the past. God will continue to call us to speak up, reach out, and build bridges. But when, in the midst of our long and rocky journey, our Good Shepherd leads us to a green pasture, we shouldn't rush through it. We should savor it.

So, stop a minute. Look around you. Do you see all these dear faces that you've missed? Do you hear the children upstairs in Balcony Church? Can you feel the prayers of generations of saints emanating from these walls?

It's like stepping with hot and dusty feet onto a cool and springy lawn. A green pasture. So stop, for a moment, and close your eyes. Imagine yourself lying down. Let the soft, deep grass support your back. Feel the light, warm breeze wash over you. Hear the soft murmur of the quiet water beside you. Gaze into the deep blue above you. And breathe.

In this moment, there is nothing you need to worry about. In this moment, there is nothing you need to do. In this moment, there is nothing you need, at all. Your Good Shepherd has brought you to this green pasture moment, so rest in it, and be restored. Thanks be to God.