



LONG TERM CARE

April 22, 2018, Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:11-18

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I have never lived in an earthquake-prone area, so my 3-4 experiences of earthquakes have been pretty mild. There was a slight earthquake back in 1985 in New Jersey that I could feel rumble the floor under my bed for about 15-20 seconds. Some years later, one in Chicago and one in Atlanta did little more than rattle the glasses on the kitchen shelves for a few seconds. No damage done, no aftershocks. There was an initial feeling of slight anxiety from the surprise of it, but then everything returned to normal and life went on as before.

But earthquakes, of course, can shake the world in significant ways, causing lasting damage, deep anxiety, and grief. On March 11, 2011, Japan was hit with a 9.0 earthquake, the 4th biggest earthquake in recorded history. It caused cracks in the seafloor, triggering a devastating tsunami. It reached across the world to Antarctica where it broke a massive iceberg. It stretched 220 miles above earth, where electrically charged particles caused ripples in the atmosphere. It triggered smaller quakes around the world; altered the pull of the gravity field; and shortened earth's day by 1.8 microseconds. Life would go on, but not as before.

Today is Earth Day on our 'ordinary' or commercial calendars, so I chose an "earthy" illustration to begin this sermon—a sermon that comes at the end of a week and a half stretch for the Brick Presbyterian Church that must feel to many of you as though the very ground underneath these hallowed floors is shaking and time itself is accelerating as seismic shifts move us from one era into another.

On April 12, we held the Memorial Service for Herb Anderson, Pastor Emeritus of the church, and beloved friend of many long-time members of this congregation.



Then, Wednesday of this past week Ellsworth G. Stanton, III died—a man whose spirit has infused this place in significant ways for decades. He has served as the Beadle in worship for many years, trained generations of our young people for leadership in the Order of St. Paul, and watched over every detail of worship in both substance and decorum week after week to ensure our services give glory to God above all. In addition, Ellsworth has been our Clerk of Session since 1989, a term of service lasting 29 years. In the entire history of the Brick Church, the only Clerk to serve longer was Horace Holden, clerk for 33 years, in the pre-Civil War era from 1829-1862. The week ended Friday with the news becoming public that after serving for 40 years as the Director of the Day School, Dr. Lydia Spinelli will retire in August of 2019.

Ripples in the atmosphere may not be too much of an exaggeration for how it feels around here—especially given the transitions that began a few months ago with Michael Lindvall’s retirement in November, Carol Ann’s retirement from the Women’s Association, and in March the arrival of your first female in the Senior Minister role. Such changes and shaking! So it is understandable that emotions like grief and anxiety are felt keenly in a time such as this.

As Providence would have it, in addition to Earth Day, it is the fourth Sunday of Easter on the church calendar. The biblical texts on this Sunday always feature Psalm 23 and some part of John 10, highlighting shepherd/sheep imagery, an “earthy” subject to be sure. God is the Shepherd of Psalm 23 who guides and protects, and Jesus is the Good Shepherd in John 10 willing to lay down his life for the sheep. The metaphor in both passages giving reassurance that God’s steadfast love surrounds us always, accompanying us in times of injury, uncertainty and threat.

Now, shepherds and shepherding were part of the common life of the people in both the Old and New Testaments, the metaphor speaking to their heart in a way it may not to those of us whose daily paths are cement and asphalt, whose green pastures are mere patches, and whose still waters are contained in a reservoir in Central Park.



In the Old Testament, the metaphor was both positive and negative. God is likened to a Shepherd in positive ways; but the kings of Israel are referred to as shepherds...negatively: they are bad shepherds, out for their own gain, endangering the flock. John 10 offers a similar contrast, between the Good Shepherd and a person who is a 'hired hand'—one tends the sheep out of deep commitment, the other is paid to do the job but runs when danger comes. The Good Shepherd is one willing to risk everything. To protect the people against the self-interest of kings, in Ezekiel 34:15, God declares, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep." So, in John 10, when Jesus declares: "I am the Good Shepherd"—it is an audaciously bold claim. It is one of the seven "I am" statements Jesus makes in John, the focus of a recent women's retreat with Rebekah. Way back at the burning bush, Moses asked what name God should be called. God replied, "I am." So in John 10, Jesus proclaims God's name in himself—as God promised to be the shepherd of the people, Jesus, too, promises to be the Good Shepherd. Jesus makes this promise while facing uncertainty and threat. Since John 5:18, there have been plots to arrest and kill him. In the chapters on both sides of our passage, the threats intensify. Still, Jesus tends his flock, speaking reassuringly to his disciples that he will risk everything for their welfare.

When I went to be the Senior Minister of the church in Asheville, I discovered that one of my members was a shepherd. A real shepherd. On visits to his farm, Anthony showed me how sheep have become so domesticated they have lost their ability to defend themselves. Utterly dependent upon the shepherd, I watched him shear them, feed them, and gather their lambs in his arms. Anthony is a shepherd who emails, so he would occasionally write to me about recent events: How he spent all night out in the cold helping ewes give birth. How some of the lambs live and others die under a night sky filled with stars that shepherds have searched for centuries. One night, after getting home late from a Session meeting, Anthony said that when he pulled up in his truck in the darkness, the sheep in the field became restless, fretting aloud, fearing a stranger had come into their midst. Anthony called to them, telling them to go on back to sleep...it was just him. And because



they knew his voice, knew that he cared for them and that they were safe in his presence, they settled down and slept in peace.

God the shepherd is “earthy” indeed, standing knee-deep in the mud and the muck we make of things or that comes with the winds and the rains of the world. God the shepherd holds and guides us until God’s own hands are slick with the oil of our sweat and anxiety. Anthony once wrote: “The good shepherd knows each sheep—and the sheep definitely know their shepherd. They trust the shepherd to lead them to abundant food, to reunite them with the new lamb that has crossed under the fence, to get them ‘unhung’ from fences and brush where they had no business being in in the first place, to protect them from wild dogs and coyotes that threaten them. ...I guess that is how God is, too...,” Anthony mused.

For the past couple of weeks, I have been reading Deane Turner’s two-volume history of this church and also a Shorter History written in 1943, expanded in 1968. The readings made companionable company during these last 10 days of unexpected change and sadness as the church absorbs more shaking and shifting in this transitional time. Having just celebrated your 250th anniversary, most of you already know well the rich history of the Brick Church. Such a sturdy past gives you a lot of experience to draw from for the present. This church has had outstanding leadership since its beginning not only from its clergy but also from gifted, faithful members—such leadership I see now in your present staff and membership as well. You have been blessed with unusually long pastorates, many pastors staying 23-38 years, and Gardiner Spring who will never be outdone, staying 63 years! This steadiness no doubt helped in every transitional time before, as it helps us now. In most instances there was no crisis that caused the transition, so the church just kept faith and kept moving forward.

Yet for all of the staying power the Brick Church has had, it never got stuck in place. In fact, the opposite is true. From the outset, this congregation chose to be willing to move forward, literally; continuously remaining open to the Spirit’s call to respond to whatever new purposes and plans God might put before you, even if it meant a change in address or associating with new people. It is unusual in church



histories to read of a church willingly moving locations once, let alone several times, to meet demographic changes and new mission opportunities. And you have merged with other churches several times—never weakening or becoming watered down, but rather building both bodies of believers into one, increasing in strength and membership. There is resilience in your DNA and a willingness to embrace change from a healthy center, in the sure hope that God the Shepherd is guiding you in paths of righteousness by way of cement and asphalt and, yes, brick.

Peter Gomes, who was Professor of Christian Morals and Minister of The Memorial Church at Harvard University until his death, wrote that the 17th century Congregational churches in New England are never described as “founded.” Their sign will not say, “Founded in 1620,” “Founded in 1640, 1690...” Instead, they use a very strange nomenclature found nowhere else in the church, either in Europe or elsewhere in this country: The church sign will say, “Gathered in 1620,” “Gathered in 1640, 1690...” Gomes believes there is something very different between being founded and being gathered. It is the notion of sheep being gathered into the sheepfold of God.¹ Sheep who gather around a shepherd who leads them in and out with firm yet tender care. The Brick Church was founded in 1767, assembling for the first time for worship on January 1, 1768. But as the Shorter History puts it: the origins of this church go back to 1706 when a few Presbyterians of Scots-Irish descent began gathering for “cottage prayer meetings” in homes.

The God who gathered us long ago gathers us still this morning. God the Shepherd offers long-term care and keeping. We follow the Good Shepherd who laid down his life so that we might live ours together here and now without fear or despair. Because we are known and because we know the Shepherd’s voice, we can grieve our losses, express our anxiety about eras and people we love passing away or moving on with vigor, even as we move into the future, sure that it is, like we all are, in God’s safe fold.

This past Tuesday, we saw the shifting of an era in our nation as well with the news of Barbara Bush’s death. I was moved by the statement her son, President



George W. Bush, released. I think it was the way he chose to say it that caught me—holding two seemingly disparate truths together without conflict.

President Bush said: “Laura, Barbara, Jenna and I are sad, but our souls are settled because her soul was settled.” Sad but settled. That is a faith statement. You’ll see that word in our closing hymn today as well.

The next day, Bush spoke at the Leadership Forum as previously scheduled. He talked about his mother for a bit, thanked people for their prayers, then spoke of his faith and hers that there is a loving God who offers an abundant, eternal life. He ended by saying he could hear her voice still speaking to him. She would say, “Move on with your life, George, and continue to do the fabulous work you are doing at the Bush Center.” So that is what he got up the next day determined to do.

In the midst of the transitions and shaking in these days, let us be sad and settled, because both can true without conflict. In fact, it is a faith statement. With trust in the Good Shepherd, let us move with Him as He leads, to do the fabulous work to which we are called, for His name’s sake.

Amen.

ⁱ Peter J. Gomes, “Good Shepherd, Good Sheep” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30:4 (August 2003), 295.