

**May 1, 2022**

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**Woe to the Shepherds**

**Our second reading is Psalm 65.**

<sup>1</sup> Praise awaits<sup>Ⓜ</sup> you, our God, in Zion;  
to you our vows will be fulfilled.

<sup>2</sup> You who answer prayer,  
to you all people will come.

<sup>3</sup> When we were overwhelmed by sins,  
you forgave<sup>Ⓜ</sup> our transgressions.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those you choose  
and bring near to live in your courts!

We are filled with the good things of your house,  
of your holy temple.

<sup>5</sup> You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds,  
God our Savior,  
the hope of all the ends of the earth  
and of the farthest seas,

<sup>6</sup> who formed the mountains by your power,  
having armed yourself with strength,

<sup>7</sup> who stilled the roaring of the seas,  
the roaring of their waves,  
and the turmoil of the nations.

<sup>8</sup> The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;  
where morning dawns, where evening fades,  
you call forth songs of joy.

<sup>9</sup> You care for the land and water it;  
you enrich it abundantly.

The streams of God are filled with water  
to provide the people with grain,  
for so you have ordained it.<sup>Ⓜ</sup>

<sup>10</sup> You drench its furrows and level its ridges;  
you soften it with showers and bless its crops.

<sup>11</sup> You crown the year with your bounty,  
and your carts overflow with abundance.

<sup>12</sup> The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;  
the hills are clothed with gladness.

<sup>13</sup> The meadows are covered with flocks  
and the valleys are mantled with grain;  
they shout for joy and sing.

This psalm is filled with references to the wonders of our world. The streams filled with water. The grasslands and the wilderness. The hills, clothed with gladness. The valleys. The mountains and the seas, with their roaring waves. And those wonders are not just there for us to behold, even though, yes, there is a lot to behold. They are also there to sustain us with their bounty. We have visions of grain, and crops, and abundance. "We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple," the Psalm goes.

The call that Bill laid out, then, is to be stewards of this house, this temple, that God has provided us. Now, part of that call is self-preservation, of our home, our temple, our abundance. And part is showing gratitude to our creator, our home's creator, our temple's creator.

But our call to be stewards of God's creation can also be seen as part of our call, as Christians, to mission work. For stewardship is not only about self-preservation or about praising the Lord, but also about mission. Our duty, our responsibility as Christians to our neighbors.

As Christians, we remember the admonition in Ezekiel 34: "Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock."

Our responsibility is clear: we are shepherds, and our responsibility, as shepherds, is to consider the entire flock, and not just our own stomachs and our own backs. And that flock is, of course, each other. Our fellow human beings—those who we know, and those whom we will never know. But while we are all shepherds, called to care for one another, we are also all sheep, being cared for by each other. And there is a beauty in that shared responsibility and vulnerability.

Now, normally when we think of our responsibility as shepherds—of our mission—we ask questions about where and what the needs are. Is it food and seeds for the already-hungry? Water for the already-thirsty? Medicine for the already-sick? Shelter for the already-unhoused? A home and safety for the already-displaced? Identifying this need, we respond. We donate. We walk, run, or rock. We prepare & cook. We teach. We clean. We collect. We build. We lobby. We pray. And after our efforts, our hope is that the hungry are full. The thirsty are quenched. The sick are healed. The unhoused are warm. And the refugees are safe.

In doing this work, we are generally thinking reactively. These needs already exist. The hunger. The thirst. The illness. The homelessness. The war. The displacement. The suffering of our flock. And seeing those needs, we act. But we react.

We less often think prospectively, in terms of what are our responsibilities, as Christians, as shepherds, to prevent that hardship. What can we do, in other words, to limit the occurrence of suffering in the first place? The hunger. The thirst. The illness. The homelessness. The displacement. The war. After all, a good shepherd doesn't just lie and leap on the occasion when the flock is being threatened by wolves or is emaciated by empty fields and dried waters. No, the good shepherd builds fences and keeps watch and works to keep the fields lush and full. The good shepherd knows they have failed the flock if they simply wait until the harm, pain, and suffering have already come. Because then it is already too late for some. For the shepherd, sloth, overindulgence, and indifference mean failure. "Woe to those shepherds," we hear in Ezekiel.

And thus woe to us, because we are failing as shepherds. Yes, we are reacting when we see the hunger and the thirst and the illness and the homelessness and the displacement and the war. Yes, we could do more, but we are not indifferent. But we are failing as shepherds by letting the curds, the wool, the meat distract us from the mission work we could be doing to prepare and prevent waves of new hunger, new thirst, new illness, new homelessness, new displacement, and new war.

Already, we are seeing the hunger that comes from increasingly unpredictable weather patterns in places where farmers have long relied on the regularity of rain to plan their sowing and harvesting, in western Kenya, southern Madagascar, and the Indian subcontinent. We are seeing the illness that comes from waves of zoonotic diseases as humans encroach upon and destroy animal habitats: Ebola, measles, smallpox, and coronaviruses. We are seeing the homelessness and displacement that come as those in sinking, coastal cities—Jakarta, Monrovia, Dhaka—fight losing battles as they bale the saltwater from their homes. And we are seeing the violence that stems from growing populations competing over increasingly vanishing arable lands, in the Sahel, where the Sahara Desert expands southward, mile by mile, year after year, or in Afghanistan, or in Central Africa.

In the years, decades, and generations to come, people will come to do minutes for mission at this very pulpit, organize fundraisers in that very boardroom, and hold events in that very parish hall, to do mission work to react to those and countless other pressing needs. To feed the hungry. House the homeless. Care for the sick. And bring safety to the refugee. They will be acting as shepherds, but they will be doing reactive mission work. But it is our responsibility—and in our power—today, to do proactive, forward-thinking mission work—work of environmental stewardship—to make sure that some of those minutes for mission, boardroom meetings, and fundraisers never have to happen.

Our most-impactful work—the most urgent work—as shepherds is that proactive act. That work that calls us to think prospectively, to be able to see the threats that can come—that will come—from our

current actions, and our current inaction, if we don't do the hard work and make the hard choices. To make those investments that will shift us from the non-renewable sources of energy, that we know will not last us forever and that we know are seeding our own destruction and the destruction of our flock. To cut down on our over-consumption and our disposable conveniences, that we know are draining our soil of nutrients, choking our lungs with toxins, and filling our waters—and our own blood—with microplastics.

We should not delude ourselves. There are reasons we are not good shepherds. Proactive thinking—and proactive mission work—is challenging. It isn't easy. It isn't easy because we are not really hardwired for this kind of thinking and action as humans. It requires us to have faith in what we cannot necessarily see. Having faith in the science—the science that God gave us the brains to undertake. The gifts to understand His creation. The gifts to, as Bill just told us, protect and defend His creation.

It isn't easy, because it requires us to put in the work, to make investments, to make sacrifices, to do, essentially, mission work—when others aren't. To put in the work, while others are, to use social science parlance, just free-riding.

And it isn't easy, because it requires us to make these sacrifices to our current practices—to consume less, to invest differently, to learn more, to listen more—when there is a very high likelihood that the main beneficiaries of our mission work will never be known to us. Either because they live far away in the drying lands of the Sahel or the streets of sinking urban Bangladesh. Or because they are the future generations who will be here, and, we hope, inhabit these spaces long after we are all gone.

What most of those people—the living and the yet-to-be-living—have in common is that they are not the ones primarily contributing to our current environmental crises—they are not the primary over-polluters, the over-consumers, the look-the-other-ways of now—that is us—but they will bear the majority of the hardships that these crises inflict.

So, no, this won't be easy. No one ever promised that being shepherds to one another—that our call to serve God and neighbor—would be easy. In fact, we were promised the opposite. That is why it is called mission work. But that mission, that work, that call to be good shepherds requires us to incorporate all of those people—near and far, living and yet-to-be-living—into our flock. To be good shepherds to the earth and, in turn, to be good shepherds to those neighbors, as they as they will in turn be called to be good shepherds to others.

Let us pray.

Lord, as we acknowledge the beauty of your ways and the works of your creation, help to raise our consciousness to feel more deeply connected to that creation and to all those in our flock touched by that creation. And give us the courage and wisdom to see that, as shepherds, our mission work must not just react to the needs of today, but anticipate and consider the needs of tomorrow. Amen

### **Benediction**

The Lord bless each of us and keep us safe in this world under your loving care. Now send us out to be earth-carers in our communities. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Alleluia! Amen.