

Whence Cometh Our Security? – Brian Hartley

Psalms 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Those of you who know me understand that technology is not my forte. From the early days of trying to learn how to drive an automobile, to the current gnashing of teeth that surrounds the incomprehensibility of my personal computer, I have struggled all of my life with machines. That is why I entrust the health of my car to a mechanic. Just ask my wife. If there is an unknown noise, a drip of some indistinguishable fluid, something odd about the steering—the first thing I do is try to get it into the shop. I miss the old days when we lived in Toronto and I could drive it into the Canadian Automobile Association Inspection Centre where I would receive a detailed annual report on about six sheets of paper that assessed every moving part. At the end of it, there would always be this lengthy handwritten priority list of anything and everything that could or should be done, with those items of chief importance highlighted in yellow. I always told Darlene that it was the best \$100 that I could spend, because it provided me with some peace of mind.\

But upon critical reflection, you might really wonder why anyone would spend what today is probably closer to \$300 on such a venture. If I were being really honest, I would confess to you that I have a propensity for trying to be in control at all times, that I am somewhat obsessed with needing to be secure. As silly as it might seem, only after I had completed the annual inspection and addressed any and all of the possible potential trouble spots, could I drive out onto the highway with confidence knowing that I had done all in my power to put myself and my family out of danger. Yet the reality is that no matter how much preventive maintenance I did or how many precautions I took, I could never entirely relieve the feeling that I was not completely secure. At any time a tire could still blow, a radiator overheat, or a belt self-destruct.

Many of us are not unlike this when it comes to a philosophy of life. We spend much of our time trying to minimize our risks. We exercise for our health and try to at least occasionally eat some of the right foods. We buy life, home, and extended care insurance. We seek to secure a good education for ourselves and for our children. But as we are all painfully aware these days, security of any kind is a sort of chimera. As soon as we think we are getting close to it, it tends to evaporate before our eyes. Those who once thought their jobs secure and an annual pay raise inevitable learn, sometimes quite painfully, that such is just not the case. Those who have sought to accumulate possessions for much of their lives discover that even these can disappear, or, at the very least, appear insignificant in light of larger issues. And there are those among us who have experienced the very painful reality that good health is not to be taken for granted and that as we grow older the body begins to deteriorate, despite all of the bran we pump in and all of the sweat we pump out. No matter how much money we have, how well educated we are, and how many possessions we own, we simply cannot buy security.

What is particularly frustrating are the charlatans who continue to stand up in pulpits or speak to us out of our screens to proclaim that, if you will only come to Jesus, you will be guaranteed material blessings beyond measure, physical healing beyond your imagination, and earthly security beyond belief. This kind of “health and wealth” prosperity gospel has no basis in either reality or in Scripture. It is a blatant lie intended to give Christianity a hearing in a myopic

society madly in pursuit of security in an unstable world. Instead, it often winds up leaving people bitter and angry because, as my Granny used to say, “Life just ain’t so!” There is no magic pill that we can purchase off of life’s drug counter, as we purchase medication from the pharmacy in town, which will guarantee us a life of security. Several of this morning’s scriptures center around this very theme of security in an insecure world, and they often draw upon the image of the shepherd to communicate what it is we need to know. They suggest to us that, in the very end, our only security is to be found in Christ Jesus.

During the time we lived in the U.K., we were constantly amazed at the large number of sheep that you could observe in the countryside. During the Industrial Revolution, the wool produced in England and refined in factories became one of the leading cash crops in all of Europe. These dumb brutes helped this little island gain ascendancy over many larger nation-states. My senior year of high school, I collected the quotes of my favorite teacher in a small pamphlet which my friend Greg Hendren and I attempted to sell at a profit. One of Mr. Clay’s off-the-wall statements was, “There’s nothing to compare in the whole world with the stench of a damn herd of sheep after a fresh rain.” If you’ve ever experienced that smell, you don’t soon forget it. Dumb and smelly, these creatures of habit have only one redeeming value—what they carry on their backs. And it is for this reason that a shepherd must be willing to risk his life.

Throughout much of early Christian art the image of Christ as shepherd is dominant. In the catacombs in Rome, in the early residences that dot Asia Minor and the Middle East, Jesus is continually portrayed as a keeper of sheep. And so we are hardly surprised that the early church laid claim to the 23rd Psalm as a centerpiece in its understanding of the person of Christ. Down through the ages, when facing difficulties, Christians have turned unerringly to this particular psalm for comfort and for strength. It has become the “gold standard” for Christian funerals.

The attitude that the Psalmist reflects is a realistic one. We are confronted by images of both trouble and assurance. The picture developed of death, evil, and unseen enemies rings true to life. This is no sunshine, everything-will-be-okay perspective on life, but one that moves ahead with the assurance of the sustained presence of the Gentle Shepherd. In the midst of life’s difficulties, the positive images still predominate. Green pastures, still waters, the accompanying rod and staff, the full table, and the sanctuary of the Lord’s house all present us with places of respite without ignoring the reality of the storms of life. The Psalmist clearly affirms for us that trouble and trials are parts of life—that there is no security, except the promised sustenance of the One who walks with us.

Standing at the freshly-dug graveside of a loved one, packing up your office after undergoing a reduction-in-force, receiving a quarterly report of retirement funds after a severe drop in the stock market—you don’t need to be reminded of the uncertainty of life. At such times, the false claims made by the health and wealth gospel-ers only leads to anger and frustration. In such moments, the Disney-like world portrayed by Hollywood seems far away indeed. When reality strikes, you can easily agree with the assessment I read a number of years ago by a hopeless, unemployed forty-year-old: “No amount of rationalization, no combination of pious platitudes, provide comfort in such times. Only the calm assurance and recognition that there is One who walks with us can bring the peace that is necessary and sought after.”

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus is accosted by those who want security. They ask him plainly, *How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.* I am reminded of that arrogant, prove-it-to-me attitude revealed in some of my favorite lyrics of “Jesus Christ Superstar,” uttered by King Herod: “Prove to me that you’re no fool, walk across my swimming pool. If you’ll do that for me, then I’ll let you go free. Come on, King of the Jews!” Jesus, however, refused to be pushed into a corner. Like Dr. Wayman suggested last week, I oftentimes turn to the Church Fathers for guidance in making sense of the text. Unsurprisingly, it is one of my favorite prophetic preachers, John Chrysostom, he they called the “golden-tongued,” who says of this passage: “They do not believe, not because Jesus is not a shepherd, but because they are not sheep.” Their problem is not one of not asking the right questions; it is one of perception. They insist on trying to shove Jesus into a paradigm of their own making.

For context, in John’s gospel, paying attention to where we are in the Jewish liturgical calendar is extraordinarily important. Today’s narrative takes place in the wintertime, during the Feast of Lights—what is called Chanukah. It was a time of great celebration when the Jewish community gathered to remember the miracle of how the Temple was restored and the Syrian army conquered during the days of the Maccabees. For, approximately five generations prior to the time of Jesus, the Jewish state was restored to a remnant of its former glory. Those were the “good old days” that would have been pointed to by Jesus’ contemporaries—the referent they would have pointed to on their caps emblazoned with, “Make Israel Great Again.” And when they spoke of the coming Messiah, it would have been in this context that they would have thought. Mattathias and his sons led the great resistance against the Syrians and their abominable Greek ways. The temple was liberated and cleansed and the office of High Priest and Governor united. The death of the hated Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the one they called “anti-Christos,” was hailed as a victory of good over evil. Just so did the leaders in Jesus’ day continue to look for a leader, a liberator, a military general who would take command and crush the heel of the Roman boot that ground them into the dust. They looked for someone who brandished a sword and covered himself in the blood of the oppressors. Such a manly-man, such an outspoken take-no-prisoners man of action would have received their allegiance. But this Jesus who stood before them appeared as something of an enigma. He did not fit what they expected or were looking for. For the Jewish religious leaders, while martyrdom might be a possibility, it should be the result of a glorious fight to the death, something of a “Braveheart” ending, not an ignominious death on a cross at the end of a passive handing-over of one’s life.

Perhaps no picture speaks more loudly of this contrast than that of John of Patmos in the closing book of our New Testament. In his text, seated around the throne, are those who have been made clean through the blood of the Lamb, those who paid the ultimate sacrifice—their very lives. They, who knew no security in life, are granted the privilege of the best seats in the house because they proved faithful in times of crisis. It is this picture to which Hugh Latimer appealed before his burning at the stake in October of 1555 when he turned to his friend Nicholas Ridley and said, “You and I shall light such a candle in all of England that it shall never go out!” This kind of deprivation, this total embrace of a life without security, is one you and I know little of. A broken-down automobile hardly qualifies one to speak of being deprived or without security. The Revelator’s vision suggests a picture of worshipping God absent ordeal and deprivation, forever abiding in the presence of the Lamb of God. Their reward is simply being able to enjoy the presence of the Wounded Savior.

God's presence features prominently, as well, in the 23rd Psalm. The desire here is to *dwell in the house of the Lord forever*. The Psalter, in fact, is filled with this yearning for perpetual rest in God, whether finding refuge *under God's wings*, or discovering protection in God's holy temple. We might even go so far as to postulate that "dwelling in God's house" serves as a fitting summation of the aspirations expressed in the Psalms. And, in fact, it is in John's gospel where the narrator picks up on this idea in the opening chapter to describe Jesus' mission as the Word of God as that of *pitching his tent among us*, dwelling with those of his flock. Jesus even proclaims, a chapter later (2:19), that he himself is the new temple, and in his farewell address beckons the disciples to *make your home in me, as I make mine in you* (John 15:4).

All of our searching in life for a place of security reveals that our innate human desire is to "come home." But we oftentimes distort this longing into something much more self-centered. For my generation, it was the suggestion that the purpose of life is to "find ourselves." Yet the amazing thing was that the deeper we looked, the more we realized that there was nothing there to find. Many of us have now spent a lifetime accumulating a household full of wonderful technological gadgets and spent countless dollars on self-improvement, only to discover how tragically lonely we are. St. Augustine long ago reminded us that there is a God-shaped vacuum inside each of us; we insist on trying to fill it with everything except God, and then wonder why we are still hungry for fulfillment and intimacy.

The mystery of the Incarnation, made known in Christ's death and resurrection, is that the Gentle Shepherd longs to set up residence inside each of us—that we have become the sovereign God's dwelling place. We have been on a long journey, seeking to find our home through knowledge, competence, notoriety, success, friends, money, sensations, pleasure, dreams—even artificially-induced states of consciousness. And in the process we have only managed to become strangers to ourselves—people, Henri Nouwen says, who have an address but are never home, and hence can never be addressed by the true voice of love. To those tortured this day by either inner or outer fears, and who are looking for the house of love and acceptance where they can find the intimacy that their hearts desire, comes the voice of the Gentle Shepherd. True conversion simply means "coming home," learning to listen to the voice of the Beloved and, in the end, letting go of our need for security and control.

The last few weeks in our community have been trying ones for us. Open the pages of the Advocate and one sees institutions and agencies struggling for adequate resources in a time when our state has not had a budget for the better part of a year. Many of us in this very congregation have had to make difficult choices about our future not knowing what may lie ahead. Those things we have come to count upon—a functioning government, a steady income, the promise of continued employment—have all been challenged. At such times, we tend to grasp for anything that will provide security. Today's texts, however, remind us that following Jesus means simply learning to listen for the voice of the Master and to follow him. In the end, it is a great adventure with little security but the guaranteed presence of the One who alone can claim to be the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

In a few moments, we will hear, once again, those familiar words of invitation to the banqueting table of which the Psalmist speaks. Perhaps you have been disappointed recently. Some of your security has been taken from you and you've come today wanting to know how to reclaim it.

You will not find such at this Table. You will not leave here richer or younger or wiser. But you can leave today in the presence of the Good Shepherd. It is only he who can offer us true security by offering us of his very self. Take, eat and drink of his body, and be thankful. Amen.