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“The Lord is My Shepherd”

Sermon preached at Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, Saratoga, CA

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I have a saying in my kitchen that reads, “I can't change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.”

We at Saint Andrew's are experiencing a change in the direction of the wind. All of us on staff, both clergy and lay, are being asked to adjust our sails, change our direction and take a new course to reach our destination. This change in direction is caused by the drastic cuts to our operating budget. For some of us this change is more radical than for others. But our destination, I hope, remains the same. Our destination as Christians is that we belong to the heart of God. Our goal is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. We belong to God and one another in and through Christ. We are connected by our baptism to the body of Christ. No matter what happens to us in this life, God loves us unconditionally.

Our society tells us in countless ways that human beings are like possessions that can be disposed of. This is not true! We are not anyone's possession but God's. We belong to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who is the One who loves us, who sees us as individuals to be loved and cared for. He knows our needs before we ask. He is the source of our life.

I believe that life is a gift. We are gifts from God to one another. All that we have and all that we are come to us by God's grace. Fifteen years ago, you, the people of Saint Andrew's, entered my life as a gift. My heart is filled with gratitude for all that we have shared together. I know that some of you are feeling angry and hurt because of the changes that are occurring here at Saint Andrew's. Anger, hurt and disbelief are part of the grief process. However, it can be easy to get stuck there if we adopt the attitude of our culture that those we love are our possession to which we are entitled.

As Christians, if we believe that our life and the life of those we love is entrusted to us by God, then our response to such love can be one of gratitude for this great gift we have been given. We have a choice! Yes, the pain of separation is real, but so is gratitude! I invite you to consider choosing gratitude!

For the past 15 years you have blessed my life by sharing your life with me. I am grateful for the many joys and many sorrows we have shared. We have experienced the joy of new birth and new discoveries and the sadness of death. Together we have wept with those who are mourning and we have rejoiced with those who are rejoicing. I am sad to be leaving in June, but I am so very thankful for all the life we have shared together.

This is a bittersweet time. I continue to find comfort and strength in the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which for me is a psalm of gratitude to the Good Shepherd who loves and cares for us. The image of the Good Shepherd guiding his flock to good pasture reminds me that we are often like sheep that need a Good Shepherd to guide them.

We like sheep, can be stubborn and not want to go to a new pasture. We like it where we are. We put our heads down, nibbling away at whatever stubble of grass is left and stay in the same pasture until it is so rutted nothing can grow! But the Good Shepherd knows when it is time to move the sheep so that they do not wear out the land.

The Good Shepherd knows when it is time to move to the green pastures in the high mountain country for the summer. I am told that today, as in Biblical times, as summer approaches, a good shepherd will move his sheep from the sheepfold near the ranch house to the fresh grass of the pasture high up in the mountains. To get there, the sheep walk through the valleys because there is some food to eat along the way and there are fresh streams of water to drink. These valleys are not always easy places, as there could be predators on the high cliffs waiting for the sheep. The good shepherd always protects his sheep by using his rod to drive off predators like coyotes, wolves, cougars, or even stray dogs. He beats the bushes with his rod to chase away snakes and other creatures that would frighten or harm the sheep. The valleys can be dark and scary places with shadows because the sunlight cannot reach all the way to the bottom.

The Good Shepherd gently guides his flock using his voice and his staff. He touches the sheep gently with his staff to keep them on the right path. He guides them through the valley to the green, fresh pastures of the mountains. The valleys are the best way to reach the mountains, but it is not always easy getting there. The way can be dangerous, dark, scary and stormy. Storms can come up quickly in the mountains and cause flash floods. But the Good Shepherd is always looking ahead to protect and guide his flock safely through the valley to the high pasture.

Jesus is like the Good Shepherd described in the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. Have you ever taken a walk with Jesus? I was invited to do so last summer. I was invited to go outside and walk in the woods. I was asked to imagine Jesus walking first on my left-hand side. Then, I was asked to imagine Jesus walking on my right-hand side. I discovered that when Jesus was walking on my left, I felt that he was beside me, listening to me. I could have an intimate conversation with him. When I imagined Jesus walking on my right, I felt that he was walking ahead of me, occasionally turning around and looking at me to encourage me to follow him into the future.

That is where I am now. I see Jesus going ahead of me and calling me into the future. I feel great sadness as I am being called to leave this pasture which I love here at Saint Andrew's. Yet, I know that I can trust Jesus the Good Shepherd to lead me to a new place even I cannot totally see where I am going. I do have glimpses of what that place might look like.

Jesus has been nudging me to grow in two areas of ministry over the past year. One is to continue to develop my skills as a spiritual director and to practice this ministry within the Christian community. You know that I began the Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction at San Francisco Theological Seminary in January. I plan to continue this 3 year course.

The other area I am being drawn to is the ministry of Interim Pastor whose role is to guide a congregation through the transition time between pastors. My husband, Jim, and I also hope to have our own retreat center someday. These are some of my dreams. What are your dreams for yourself and Saint Andrew's?

During the next few weeks I hope that we can celebrate and give thanks together for the past 15 years we have shared. I also hope that you can begin to imagine the future for Saint Andrew's. The seeds of the past 15 years have been planted. Now is the time to water them, encourage them to grow in the direction God is calling you to grow in. It may not be easy. There may still be dark valleys and storms ahead. You and I may need to adjust our sails so that we can reach our destination safely.

Remember, the Good Shepherd is always with you.  
He may be beside you whispering in your ear.  
He may be behind you, nudging you forward.  
He may be ahead of you, calling you to follow.  
Or, when you really need it, he may carry you on his shoulders  
to bring you safely home.  
You are not alone. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is with you and with me.  
Allow the Good Shepherd to guide you and you will find fresh fields  
for your souls to feed on and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!