

Scrolling through my Facebook feed the other day, I was very much taken with a meme which a recently retired friend had posted. It read: “And suddenly you just know it’s time to start something new and trust the magic of beginnings.” That idea of an internal knowing that it’s time for a new chapter resonates with me, even if the previous chapters have been rich, good, and blest. “And suddenly you just know it’s time to start something new and trust the magic of beginnings”. This meme immediately brought to my mind two somewhat disparate groups---me, and other people in the process of retiring at one end of a spectrum, *and* our high school graduates at the other end of the spectrum. Admittedly, in both of these cases, the change isn’t necessarily as “sudden” as it sounds in this meme; students know that they will hopefully graduate around age 18 when they start out, and most of us in our adult working lives have some thought of retiring someday, often in our 60s. But even with that foreknowledge, there can come times of *internal* readiness for a change, when you can truly embrace the new beginning that lies ahead. I remember that when *I* graduated from High School, I was more excited about heading off to college than I was sad about leaving High School, even though I had a really positive high school experience. I don’t know how that aligns with *your* experience, graduating seniors, but however you are feeling it’s entirely natural—whether grief, anxiety or anticipation are uppermost, or whether you move through all of these emotions regularly. This emotional mix is true of retirement as well, and it’s true of most any major transition that any of us experience throughout our lives. Moving from school to work, from job to different job, from single to married, from childless to having children, from one location to another; every new beginning involves an ending, and we may grieve so much that was good. And yet every new beginning involves moving ahead into a future that is often intriguing, hopeful, and *magic*, as the meme suggests. The thing is, these life changes don’t only impact the one directly involved, do they? My retirement, or any retirement, impacts a whole lot of people, whether parishioners or co-workers. *Your* graduation, seniors, impacts your parents, siblings, and other family members, possibly more than you can easily recognize. Seeing one’s children grow up is infinitely rewarding and undoubtedly bittersweet, too. Where does the time go? How will treasured relationships be changed by your graduation and new directions?, your family wonders. Even

we, as your church family, feel some twinges to witness your growing into the bright, beautiful young women you have become, because we've watched that growing up happen. What a rich mixture life changes can be for us! How do we navigate them? Not surprisingly, as people of faith, we turn to God, and we turn to the Scriptures that reveal God to us. This morning we have before us the 23rd Psalm for our consideration as we bring together the reality of life changes *and* the reality of God's care for us *in* those changes.

Psalm 23 is the most beloved piece of sacred poetry in all the world. That means it's very familiar to us, and yet we can still learn new things about this holy text. Something I've learned recently is that in the original Hebrew, the center of this poem is in verse 4---"though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me;" And the center of that central verse is the all important word, "*you*" or "thou" as it reads in the majestic language of the King James Version. Hebrew writers played with numbers in their writings. There are 26 Hebrew words before that "you" or "thou" and 26 words after it. That "*You*" referring to God, and that *verse*, referring to God's presence with us, are literally the central point of this psalm. "*You are with me*," David rejoices as he wrote this psalm around 1000 BC. About 1000 years after that, a baby is born to a poor family in Israel, and the parents are told of their child—"He shall be called Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us." Famed theologian John Wesley's dying words are reported to have been, "The best of all is, God is with us." This is a crucial Scriptural and faith concept, that God accompanies us, walks beside us. This is the core conviction of this beloved Psalm that changes and shapes how we experience the excitement, turbulence, and anxiety caused by change; because simply put, we are not alone. "God, You are with me," *we* can also say to God, as David did.

And who is this God who is with us? This Psalm is often called the Good Shepherd psalm, and in the Gospels and in our lesson from Revelation, it is *Christ* who is identified as this Good Shepherd. We have this very tender description of Christ in that lesson from Revelation 7. He is held up as both the Lamb of God, the one Who willingly sacrifices His life for the sake of us, His flock. *And* He is held up as the Shepherd—the one Who guides us to the water of life and wipes every tear from our eyes. Truly, an intimate and loving gesture.

God provides *us*, as our Good Shepherd, with this example of sacrificial love and guidance in our lives of faith. And as followers of Jesus, *we* look to act as Good Shepherds for *others*; to do our share of loving even when it costs us, and of providing guidance and care for others. Given that it's Mother's Day, let's think about how our Moms, and of course our Dads also, can be like shepherds for their children. Think of what parents sacrifice for their children: love, energy, time, sleep, peace of mind, money, freedom. Again, possibly more than you *realize*, seniors, your parents have tried to shepherd you, and it has involved sacrifices. Other family members have done likewise. And just as *God* acts as our Shepherd out of love and with gladness, so *we* ideally act out of love and with gladness as shepherds for those *we* love.

Such shepherding is not limited to just parents or family members, obviously. Any loving relationship involves a willingness to sacrifice and to provide guidance. And shepherds don't have to be of any particular age. (I happen to know that you seniors this morning have already been shepherds in your own right. Both of you have taught Children's Church, shepherding those younger ones coming up behind you in Church. Dani has done Children's Time over the summer. And I remember during Confirmation class years how Ali always made an effort to remind the other students during that school day or on the bus ride home that there was confirmation class that night.) You young women have looked out for others. You have already been both the *recipients* of shepherding---from God, from your parents, from other family members, from this congregation; but you have also already been *practicing* the role of shepherding others *yourselves*, as followers of Jesus.

None of us know what the future holds for us. Not those graduating from high school or some other high education institution, nor those retiring, nor those facing a wide variety of changes, transitions, endings and beginnings---which is probably most of us. Certainly, the unknowns that lie ahead can make us fearful. And certainly, much of what we see around us that *is* known makes us anxious. The world seems a scary and perilous place, and it always has. David experienced this 3000 years ago, when he was beset as king by enemies from without and temptations from within. There is no time we could point to in history and claim that all was entirely and completely well. Our Northeastern Minnesota Synod met in its annual Assembly last weekend, utilizing the theme of Experiencing God's Shalom. *Shalom* is that Hebrew word for peace that

connotes not only an absence of noise or conflict, but a fullness of that which is whole, serene, and life-giving. This theme was chosen, we learned over the weekend, precisely because Shalom seems in short supply in our angry, divisive, and violent world. We fear upcoming circumstances or unknown “others”, wondering if they will bring harm in some way; and we sometimes fear *ourselves*, with our own set of weaknesses and temptations. How, then, do we face new beginning and transitions with trust rather than anxiety? Where do we find that *shalom*? We turn again to our faith and our Scriptures.

“You, God, are with me,” David rejoices in the *very center* of the 23rd Psalm. That’s the core conviction that makes the difference in how we see and respond to the challenging circumstances in which we are living. Yes, the world is a scary and dangerous place. But, it is also the very place in which the Good Shepherd become Emmanuel, “God is with us.” We are not alone. That Good Shepherd goes before us, to clear our path. That Good Shepherd walks beside us, to befriend and inspire us. That Good Shepherd walks behind us to protect us, because God’s got our backs. No matter the transition we face, God is with us and we are not alone. And the company of saints, as in our families, friends, and this congregation are with us, too. Their love and encouragement is often how God’s love and encouragement become real for us. We experience such love and shepherding, ideally, through our Moms, as we remember and honor the crucial task of mothering on this Mother’s Day. But we experience it also through our Dads and grandparents and siblings and aunts and uncles and Children’s Church teachers and friends and the person next to us in the pew. In so many, many ways, we are not alone.

Ali, Dani, (and Emmy), I feel that I can imagine what our Good Shepherd might say to you this morning and these coming weeks as you leave high school behind and walk into a new future. I can hear God saying: “I created you. I name you. I love you. You are mine. No matter what. No matter whether you hit the home run or strike out miserably. No matter whether you fulfill all of your biggest dreams and impress the heck out of everyone, or whether you lose your way and blow it. No matter whether you live with a daily awareness of Me, or whether you rarely think of me or are mad at me or reject Me altogether. No matter *what*. You are mine. I claim you. You are loved.” That’s what God says to each of *you*, and to each of *all of us*.

As you three move on into the next phase of your lives, your parents, your families, and all of us, are maybe a contradictory collection of emotions. We are glad that you can live out the truth of that meme I mentioned earlier: “And suddenly you just know it’s time to start something new and trust the magic of beginnings.” We want you to have that internal readiness to embrace change, and we wish for you moments of magic and wonder. We *hope* so much for you, and we *fear* so much for you. We know the promise and excitement of starting out young, and we know the problems that can come, and we really want only the best for you. Here, I think, is what all of *us* want to say to you this morning and in these coming weeks of change: “Please know that whether your journey takes you far from us or keeps you near at hand, this congregation cares about you. You are loved. You are valued here. No matter what, there is a place for you here. We always welcome you. We hope we will see you as often as possible. We need you. Possibly more than you realize, you need *us*, too. You are always family to us, sisters in Christ.” That’s what we want you to know. Like your parents and family, we all have to entrust you into God’s hands as you start out, but we keep you in our hearts nonetheless. In this crazy journey called life, we pray that you—and all of us---may grow in grace, may trust and love our Good Shepherd, and may know that God is with you and us; we are not alone. Amen.