

FAITH IN WHAT'S POSSIBLE

Psalm 23; John 10: 1-11

One of the best films I've ever seen is actually a film made for children, simply called: *Babe*. It premiered on the big screen in 1995. If you haven't seen it yet, you must. It's about a pig named *Babe* who is raised on a farm in Australia. His destiny is to become slaughtered for food. But *Babe*'s real passion is to become a sheepdog. The movie is all about how *Babe* steals his way into the heart of his farm owner, and also into the hearts of all the farm animals. The climax of the movie is in how *Babe* not only becomes proficient in herding sheep, but in doing so without having to resort to threatening barks and biting of the sheep to get compliance. *Babe* succeeds by actually engaging the sheep themselves, taking them seriously and inspiring them to work together as a team. Respect and trust between *Babe* and the sheep achieves results that no amount of training of sheepdogs can achieve. *Babe* steals everyone's hearts, including the dogs themselves.

Now even though this may seem like a bit of a silly plot, the movie was a huge success, grossing hundreds of millions of dollars and receiving seven Oscar nominations including best picture. What was it about this story and about *Babe* the pig that became so inspirational? What was it about the story that filled the wider public with hope in what's possible? And this question is not just about a film involving a pig and some sheep. No. It's also about us as a society especially today, imperilled by a global pandemic and grieving the largest mass shooting in our nation's history. We, too, need some faith in what's possible. We, too, need some hope that healing and transformation can happen for us and among us. But we also need the key to unlock such possibility. Where do we find it?

Let's take a dive into our scripture readings in search of some revelatory wisdom. And let's begin with one of the most beloved passages in all of scripture: the 23rd Psalm. At funerals, at weddings, sung and read, this Psalm has ministered to thousands of people through the ages. Why? What is it about these mere six verses that has touched the emotional and spiritual core of so many? Well, it's all about the beautiful imagery that conveys deep things of the heart. The language is richly descriptive with metaphors that are easy to visualize. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." What does it mean to have a shepherd? What does it mean to be in want of nothing? It means there is one who will guide me, protect me, make sure I am cared for and provide all I truly need. It's a beautiful image. But, can I believe it? This psalm is all about the journey of faith.

And so, it goes on to offer some richly descriptive metaphor of what such faith can feel and look like. Imagine, the Psalmist says... imagine lying down in lush greenery beside a lake

when the water is totally still. Imagine a pathway down beside the water where you can walk and then lie down, totally surrounded by lush foliage... What a peaceful, serene image!...

But then, there's struggle that comes in life. What if I'm finding it hard to get to that green pasture, still water and restoration of soul because I'm feeling terrorized by fear or grief-stricken by loss? This psalm addresses that too: 'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil.' And why do I fear no evil? Because 'you are with me.' I am not alone. God's shepherdly 'rod and staff' are there to protect and guide me through the darkest valley until I find some light. Once again, I can visualize walking through a dark valley. I can barely see where I'm going. Is something or someone going to jump out at me? But then, I begin to see some light. A shepherd is there to guide me through the darkness, into the light.

But then, there's more. Life is happening all the time, and living in the light is not something permanent for any of us. There are many things we cannot control and many times and seasons of life where hardship and struggle define our journey. And so, the Psalm continues by providing the imagery of "the enemy." Who or what can become our enemy? What does it feel like to be surrounded by enemies? Are they other humans, illness, circumstances or situations? Are enemies like disasters or pandemics or fear of some mass murderer loose in the community, a spring flooding made even worse as the climate is warming? What are those things that can terrorize, paralyze and victimize you and me?...

Well, another scene is provided for us to visualize: 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.' Imagine being vindicated and honoured in the presence of your enemies. You are raised up in the face of situations where you can feel surrounded, threatened and overwhelmed. You are raised up and given a cup to drink. Your thirst is not only quenched; your cup overflows with an abundance. What is this abundance? Is it those surprising extras we do not expect – people that come our way and doors that open, all of which enrich and help renew our lives in ways we could never anticipate when we're in the midst of the struggle with 'the enemy.' When I experience my cup overflowing with abundance, I also experience a feeling of deep gratitude.

And when I feel deep gratitude, this then stirs up hope: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life... and hope over time builds up an abiding assurance within me: and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long... In a mere 6 verses, we are taken on a spectacular journey: we travel through a beautiful, lush landscape, by still waters, experiencing peace and serenity. But then we pass through a dark valley, surrounded by enemies. Our raising up begins with vindication, honour and a feeling of abundance.

Abundance leads to gratitude. Gratitude over time helps build resilience with the kind of faith, grounded in hope and assurance as we look into the future...

Wow! What a journey! No wonder this psalm has had such power to move human hearts for thousands of years! But is there an underlying foundation to the story this Psalm tells? There is. It's all about a beautiful intimacy between me and my shepherd Lord, an intimacy of communion. It is not just me. It is we. It is not just me alone. It is me and a great Thou. I am not alone. I am in communion with the one who is creator and ground of my being, one who is infinite love for me, one who is eternal shepherd. From beginning to end, my life is lived within a larger togetherness. From safe places through the darkest threats and tribulations, to restoration, gratitude, hope and peace, I am growing in this experience of communion with the ground of my being whom the psalmist calls – Shepherd and Lord... Isn't this awesome?

But Jesus takes this communion even one step further. With Jesus the shepherd, it is not just me the lone sheep and the shepherd in intimate communion. It is also us together with our shepherd and us together with each other. And what is the key ingredient that builds this intimacy of communion with each other? It is trust. Trust in the shepherd builds a capacity to create relationships of trust with one another. How does this work?

Jesus distinguishes the good shepherd from a stranger, and even more so, he distinguishes the good shepherd from thieves and bandits who come only “to steal and kill and destroy” as he says. How can the sheep tell the difference between one who is a good shepherd from one who cannot be trusted? How do they recognize the voice of the good shepherd? Jesus says this: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” In other words, trust is built when I see and recognize how much you care for me by what you're willing to share with me in terms of risk and sacrifice. Even as you are guiding me and I am choosing to follow you, we recognize in each other the kind of love and care that can trust, give from the heart, take risks, make sacrifices and offer gratitude for all that's given and received. Strangers, thieves and bandits are out for themselves. They're out to take advantage, use and abuse the sheep for their self-serving agendas, and this not only erodes any trust, it destroys any possibility of communion. It makes us all that much more fearful and vulnerable.

Unless my intimacy of communion with the ground of my being who is God leads me into building relationships based on trust, which then inspire care, generosity and even risk and sacrifice for one another, then there is no meaningful future for our togetherness as human beings. Are our relationships based on fear or trust?

One of the founding philosophers of the modern western secular world – John Locke, taught that we as human beings at our core, are driven by fear and by selfishness. What is it

that we fear most? – death. And what is it we want to save and protect most? – ourselves. Self-preservation is what drives each and every one of us at our core. But in order to protect ourselves from our greatest fear which is death, we must cooperate with one another in order to have the best chance of saving ourselves. Our selfishness to preserve ourselves binds us with each other because if we go it alone, we'll end up dead much faster than if we work together.

Now isn't this a sad basis for building a vision of community? By contrast, Jesus, the good shepherd, Like Babe the pig sheep dog, have a very different vision of what moves and motivates us creatures of God at our core – love. We are most alive and fulfilled when we are living in and through love. But love can only flourish where there is trust. And trust can only be generated when I believe you are there for me even when there's a personal cost for you. We all share vulnerability before a vast universe where anything can happen. But by coming together in love, our vulnerability becomes a vehicle for inspiring our love for one another ever more creatively.

And this, my friends, is also a message for our time – a time of real vulnerability before a pandemic that is global in its reach, a time where insane murderers have the means to kill many, a time where the vulnerable are abused, be they women suffering violence every day or elderly in care homes that have been neglected in terms of the value we have placed on their care and support. And let's add all those vulnerable and on the street like those served by Evangel Hall Mission, and our collective vulnerability to natural disasters as the Climate keeps warming... The wake up call for us must not be self-preservation or fear of death. No. Rather we are being invited to discover our creational purpose we have forgotten and lost in our fall from grace. In our busy, consumerist, materialistic and environmentally destructive lifestyle, we have lost our way... Now that we have been forced to stop a little, we are being given a hand, a hand by the great creational shepherd, a hand to find our way out of the dark valley, a way toward overcoming our enemy beginning with the enemy within...

How will our lives change in the right ways because of what we're having to live in this time? How will your life and mine develop an even clearer direction with new commitment, inspiration and resolve? May Psalm 23 and the call of Jesus the good shepherd open up some channels of divine energy in and through us... May trust overcome fear and may love overwhelm a sense of futility in any real change.

Let us pray: We are here, O God... We're at a turning point... whatever happens in the world around us, and whatever happens to others, may this become a turning point of grace and beauty, faith, hope and love for each of us... for me... Amen.