



I must admit one of the best birthday presents I have ever received was a chocolate lab, named Zoey, who continues to grace both Sarah and myself with her presence after just turning ten years young this weekend. About this time a decade ago, I was finishing up classes at seminary, still wondering where the first congregation I would serve with would be. After finding out it would be hundreds of miles away from anyone I knew, there was a bit of fear and anxiety, to say the least. And yet, the benefit of having Zoey along for this new venture was not just about having another living being in an otherwise empty parsonage, but that she would stubbornly insist on checking out the Creation surrounding us. Yes, Zoey would much prefer the outdoor adventures as far as her own legs and paws could take her.

However, I should mention that Zoey had her own shepherd of sorts, from the start. You see, for the first few months of us having her, she had to stay on our family's farm, where there was another dog: a yellow lab, named Nelly. Nelly served as a much, *much* needed shepherd to show Zoey the ropes of being a half-decent dog, at least: from moving beyond releasing the bodily functions inside to doing so outside on the grass, and, for some reason, even kicking up that grass after they were all done, as if they thought they could hide their finished business, or some kind of victory dance, or whatever it was they were doing.

Thankfully, Nelly also showed Zoey there were much cooler things to do than chew on table legs and flip-flop sandals during her puppy stage. With that in mind, Nelly was the first to show Zoey this small creek in the middle of the field behind the house. Now, I was never a fan when they went on such distant adventures, not knowing if they would ever come back, not to mention, when they did, they often arrived with all the dirt and mud they could possibly latch onto with the biggest smiles on their faces, as if they were so proud of their filthy accomplishment. Regardless, without fail, Nelly would shepherd Zoey back to the home-front, no matter the disgusting condition of their fur coats.

I like to think that because of those initial outdoor adventures with her pal, Zoey has always been more of a beach dog, to say the least. Alongside such still waters, as described in the twenty-third Psalm, or even around the choppy waves, our dog seems to have the biggest smile, the most energy and stamina, the highest kick in her steps. Because of her, we make an extra effort to return to such wondrous waters, as if that most serene part of nature has its own life-enriching, soul-nourishing, eternal-visioning power to it that other parts of the world simply cannot match. There must be a reason why the psalmist craves for the Lord, the shepherd of us all, to lead us beside such calm and soothing scenery, instilling the peaceful embrace we all long for in this life.

So, we must not quickly gloss over all the beautiful natural imagery in many people's favorite psalm. Earth Day, this past Thursday, has come and gone, but the call from this still-creating God remains to take care of that most beautiful imagery that is not limited to wide-angle lenses from television cameras or through cell phones or computers or any print publication, but all around us, every single day. As if that living, breathing, vibrant Creation boldly invites us with the most extensive hospitality imaginable to take an adventure and experience such enthralling beauty. Because even what you can see with the oldest and tallest of trees, what you can smell from the budding flowers, what you can even hear from the crashing waves; all such amazing beauty still cannot match how much God believes you are more beautiful than all of that.

It just so happens that alongside still waters, or lying in the greenest pastures, or going down whatever nature path as described in the twenty-third Psalm, the Creation has its own Gospel to proclaim to the world, not just on Earth Day once a year, but for all time. Because no matter how difficult a stretch we encounter in this life, no matter how down we may feel, the water will continue to approach the shore we walk on, as if to remind us that the very waters that immersed our soul at baptism, will continue to relentlessly flow with love and grace. As if we cannot stop God from crashing down with waves of mercy and compassion on the shores of our very life, no matter what.

Unfortunately, Zoey's shepherd, Nelly, is no longer among the living, as of a few weeks ago, now. Nevertheless, she most certainly did her part, as we are all called to do, in shepherding someone else to reveal to them the most captivating beauty around us. And yet, we are also called to shepherd the creation as well, in caring for it in whatever way we can, so that the next generation and beyond gets to be completely blown away by its wondrous majesty. Because, the Creation still has a Gospel to proclaim to all of God's children: a beauty that is not just in the trees or the water, but within us, too. All of us who God says is worth all the care that was brought to life in Jesus Christ, our Risen Savior and Lord, our good shepherd, who will insist on remaining beside us all the way to the end and forevermore. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.