

May 1 - 1 Peter 2:13-17
by Rev. Steven R. Gibson
Behavior for God's Servants

13 For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, 14 or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. 16 As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. 17 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Devotion:

I find it slightly amusing that the Lectionary calls for this passage today. We find ourselves in a difficult place -- the government is splintered along political and financial lines. Governors are calling for the states to reopen their businesses, while many institutions call for additional bailouts. People are openly demonstrating for their viewpoint. People are disagreeing often and loudly! Unity seems like a lost cause.

This passage reminds us of commonsense practices that are available to us today. We are to live in peace with one another. We are told to accept the authority of human institutions because it is God's will that our righteous living silence the foolish.

As a teenager, I believed that my parents were planning a divorce because they were planning on voting for different candidates in a national election. The lack of harmony played deeply on my soul. All those happy family memories were about to be history. How could two people that love each other not agree?

Fast forward to today, our country is in shambles and watching the news on TV is not recommended for those who have an issue with blood pressure. I can change channels and before they speak, I already know what their viewpoint is. And the sad thing is this -- not one of them are completely right and not one of them are completely wrong. So, what are our options?

Verses 16-17 sum it up well: "As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor."

This passage reminds us that Christians are free to dissent from the mandates of society. I completely understand those who want to return to work, and yet, I understand those who believe it is too early to return to work and open the economy. I completely understand the goal of social distancing (and try to practice that each day) and yet I miss the embrace of family and friends. At a recent funeral, my first reaction was to go and hug the grieving family, but I caught myself and refrained.

In the south, showing love and obeying God appear to go hand in hand with a casserole! I Peter reminds us that we are to love God and live as free people. We need to remember

that disagreements between people are natural. How do we handle disagreements? Honor and love everyone and trust God to fulfill God's purpose.

Prayer:

God, we often are concerned about the unrest in our world. Remind us that nothing ever comes as a surprise to you. When we do not understand, please increase our faith in you. Amen.

May 2 - Psalm 23

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

The Divine Shepherd - A Psalm of David

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff -- they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Devotion:

The passages for Sunday and Monday express the concept of a Shepherding God.

With the reality of social distancing, the pastoral image of a shepherd is both a calming and reassuring image in my mind. It is my prayer that you may also receive the tranquility that our Shepherd shares with us.

The writer states unequivocally that if the Lord is my shepherd, we will lack nothing. (v1) Maybe the writer was concerned about ample food, shelter, safety, the ability to pay our bills, the lack of ability to visit and care for loved ones. This list is not exhaustive and your list might contain different items, but the concept is simple -- God provides for us as a shepherd provides for his flock. Such a simple concept, but a concept that is challenging, at best, to understand and apply to life.

Once we understand that God is our provider, we are then ready to be led by God. (v2-3) God is willing to take a divine risk to lead us, but we must be willing to follow! In these two verses, we learn that God knows our weariness and leads us to green pastures to lie down and rest, where still waters are close by to quench our thirst. His leadership continues to paths of righteousness for his name's sake. These two verses remind me of young children who protest fiercely that they are not tired and do not need to rest, but yet, once they are still, they rest so very quickly. Maybe we could learn from our children?

Jeff Pashal writes, "God is the one who slows us down and restores our being." A reminder: It is God who enables us to do any good at all; the right paths that we take are the result of the direction of God.

We come to the verse that has served us for so long, (v4) during times of distress and doubt. The symbolism is stunning and catches our attention immediately -- even though I walk through the darkest valley, the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil because of God's presence. Although God is a crucified God, the Psalmist reminds us that God is also a powerful God. Immanuel (God with us) walks alongside every step of our life, identifying with us in our pain, sorrow and loss, yet protects us like a shepherd with his rod and staff. God comforts us with his rod and staff!

We now come to the feast which God prepares for us, but not only for us, but also for our enemies. Imagine entering into a banquet hall filled with our enemies, yet God leads us to a banquet table that is prepared by God for us! Because God is with us, we are comfortable eating in the presence of our enemies. But, the scene does not end there, because God anoints our heads with oil and anoints our cups beyond capacity to overflowing! God's blessings do not end!

If these days of quarantine are difficult for you, remember Psalm 23. Remember the Psalmist describes God as our shepherd, who provides for our needs, who causes us to rest and be restored, who leads us to righteousness, who serves as a protection from evil, who honors and blesses us, and whose mercy is without end! Thanks be to God.

Prayer:

God of infinite love, still our hearts so that we may acknowledge you as our Shepherd. Amen.

May 3 - John 10:1-10

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

Jesus the Good Shepherd

10 "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Devotion:

This is the second of three passages describing the Good Shepherd in this week's devotions. John's Gospel describes how God functions as our Good Shepherd: He enters the sheepfold by the gate, he calls his sheep by name, and the sheep will follow him because they know his voice. This brief passage ends stating the purpose of the Shepherd: "I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly." (v10)

God as Shepherd is used throughout the Old Testament, notably Psalm 23 (yesterday's devotion), Ezekiel 34, Isaiah 40:11 and others. What is it about people that we need a Shepherd, even though we may not recognize our need?

People have the need to be accepted and to follow someone. Ancient Israel desired a King to lead them, but in reality needed a Shepherd. Churches need a Shepherd to lead them, a leader that will develop relationships where the people will hear, recognize the Shepherd's voice and follow the Shepherd's leadership. The Shepherd is the one whose singular purpose is to protect the flock. The Shepherd is willing to sacrifice his own life for the safety of the flock. This is precisely what we need at this challenging time.

Note that the Shepherd leads the way for the sheep and they follow because they know the Shepherd. (v4) In the same manner, God, our Shepherd leads and we follow. That much is clear and easily understood. But then the waters turn a bit cloudy when Jesus identifies as the gate for the sheep. We all understand the concept of a gate as the means of entrance into a pasture and Jesus states that he is that gate. Those who enter through that gate will find pasture and salvation.

This passage answers many questions, yet other questions arise. Does that gate open only one way, or does it swing both ways? Does the gate swing open enough to allow for differences of opinion?

The challenge for today's church is how we can be known to follow Jesus during this crisis. How can we keep safeguards and still remain faithful to God? What measures and actions should we begin to ponder? What will ministry look like in the near term?

Like you, I do not know the complete answers to those questions, but I believe the answers begin in the prologue to John -- the Word became flesh and lived among us. This is the picture of God that is not willing to be a distant God, but a God who is up close and personal with his children. As Molly Marshall states, "Recovering shepherding imagery could call the church to simplicity, sacrifice, and solidarity -- needed in a time when many have lost their way."

Prayer: (Jane Eliza Leeson, 1842)

1 Loving Shepherd of your sheep, all your lambs in safety keep; nothing can your power withstand, none can pluck them from your hand.

2 May they praise you every day, gladly all your will obey, like your blessed ones above, happy in your precious love.

3 Loving Shepherd, ever near, teach your lambs your voice to hear; suffer not their steps to stray from the straight and narrow way.

4 Where you lead them may they go, walking in your steps below; then, before your Father's throne, Savior, claim them for your own.

May 4 - 1 Peter 5:1-5
by Rev. Steven R. Gibson
Tending the Flock of God

5 Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you 2 to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it -- not for sordid gain but eagerly. 3 Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. 5 In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Devotion:

Today's lesson would benefit from reading the previous section of I Peter 4:12-19 and then read today's portion. The previous section sets up what David L. Bartlett describes as Steadfast in Faith, with the purpose to remind the community of faith to remain steadfast even when a crisis comes. That purpose, to my ears, is instructive for today's pandemic and gives the reader hope.

The writer states, in assured terms, that trials will come. The implication is that Christians should not be surprised when tribulations appear and should live faithfully because our confidence is in God. It is in this context that we begin our appointed lesson: Tending (or Shepherding) the Flock of God.

The elders (whether they are pastors, church leaders, or older Christians is not clear) are encouraged to tend to God's flock - which is your earnest occupation. The writer adds another piece to the puzzle -- the elders should exercise such oversight eagerly and without hesitation. The writer actually sets himself as an example of how an elder should act. Because the writer has witnessed both the suffering and glory of Jesus Christ, he stands as an authentic witness.

At the time of the writing of this letter, the word witness may have morphed into an additional meaning -- a witness not only witnessed the suffering, but may have also shared in such suffering. Two points readily come to mind -- if the writer had witnessed and experienced Christ's suffering, then his writing becomes all the more valid, and if the

first is true, then the writer will also share in the glory that is promised to be revealed. (See Romans 6:3-5)

To serve as shepherd to the flock looks forward to the Chief Shepherd appearing. It is the Chief Shepherd that appoints or calls the shepherd, with the shepherd joining a line of precedence from Christ to Peter to the shepherd. Christ is the example for Peter; Peter is the example for the shepherds or elders; and the elders are the example for the flock. It is with this succession in mind that shepherds serve as caretakers, not as masters of the flock. Shepherds protect the flock, even if it means sacrificing their own lives, while masters order someone else to sacrifice their life for the safety of the flock.

The writer shares good news, news that states the fact that tough times will come, but nevertheless the faithful will receive the crown of glory from our Lord Jesus Christ!

Remember the words of our Lord Jesus in John 16:33b “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”

Prayer:

Dear Lord, when tough times come, help us to remember the promises you made to your people, and to gain strength from them. Amen.

May 5 - Hebrews 13:20-21

by Dr. Charles Qualls

Benediction

20 Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Devotion:

On a beautiful September day in 2015, Elizabeth and I sat in Notre Dame stadium to watch a football game. This iconic venue opened in 1930 and to call it “historic” would be a severe understatement. I had always wanted to go to a game there, and this fulfilled a dream of sorts.

We lamented one or two things in the reality of it, though. The “fan experience” there, other than the historicity itself, is actually a bit of a letdown. The concourses have not changed at all, so by modern standards the amenities are lacking. The wooden bleacher seating is still original and less than comfortable. The beatdown that our beloved visiting team took that day was perhaps most painful of all.

However, one tradition that has been alive for generations there is fascinating. Fans can’t see it happen, though. Inside the home team’s locker room, there is a sign over the door. It says, “Play Like a Champion Today!” For decades without fail, every player exiting onto

the field for a game reaches up and slaps the sign as they pass it. That is their parting focus: "Play Like a Champion Today!"

Letters in our New Testament sometimes concluded with a Benediction. This was part of worship practice even then, and that beautiful tradition has carried through in Traditional or Mainline churches right up until today. Each week at Franklin Baptist, we close with a Benediction.

A benediction in a worship service, or in this case within a biblical letter, serves a few purposes. First, it is a close or a cap to the worship experience. It signals to all that the time is coming to a finish. More importantly, though, it calls upon or "invokes" God's guidance or presence on our going out. We ask God for help. Also, this movement serves as a blessing of sorts for the time that has been spent together in God's presence.

Maybe as importantly as any of those, a benediction sends us out focused to serve. It rallies us to be God's people. If we are engaging the words of any nice benediction, it should be the application that gives us mission. Purpose. Why don't you double back and read this ending from Hebrews 13. Look at the specific requests made of God. Then, you may not ever hear a benediction in quite the same way.

Prayer:

Lord of our gathering and Lord of our departing, focus our very souls. In this odd time when we are so isolated, may we yearn for the gathered days of our future. Gatherings that might each end in a benediction, our pledge to you! Amen.

May 6 - Matthew 20:17-28

by Dr. Charles Qualls

A Third Time Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

17 While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, 18 "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; 19 then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised."

The Request of the Mother of James and John

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23 He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Devotion:

How can we be tough on any of Jesus' twelve beloved disciples? After all, what they experienced at his feet is the subject of our marvel. He hand selected them from among people who were already beginning to follow him. What they did after Jesus was resurrected and ascended did nothing short of launch the early Church. They were faithful, committed and willing. Believe me, I'd take an army of them!

Today we loop back, still celebrating in the season of Eastertide. Jesus was giving what would turn out to be in Matthew a third foretelling of his own death. That ought to have caught their full attention. As I will occasionally say to staff (or even my Sunday School class!), "What I have just said should cause you to have a few questions. I'm listening."

Maybe they had a full conversation, debriefing in detail what Jesus had just said. Because what he had just said was plain and straightforward. He was headed to Jerusalem, where humanity would **kill** him. It should have prompted some questions.

Instead, the impression we get is that these "insider" disciples did what humans will do. Ever since the secret informant Deep-throat whispered to Woodward and Bernstein to "...follow the money," I have noticed that this kind of thing is what we do. Oh, it's not just money. You could substitute "follow the power...status...position" or any of a number of other words. I don't know about you -- I get distracted by the wrong things so easily!

James and John's mother responded to Jesus' sobering message by asking that each of her boys be granted the prestigious positions of sitting at his left and right, "...in your kingdom." In a message that was about sacrifice and humility, her ambitions still guided her response. In a future that held sure death and persecution, she was still requesting visibility.

Jesus: "They're going to kill me." Mom: "That's nice... can my boys sit with you?"

Some people completely missing the message breaks every pastor's heart on a regular basis:

- You preach your heart out on the tough, persistent Syrophenician woman for Mother's Day and some fan of Mary tells you you preached on the wrong mother.
- You teach your heart out on the transformative love of Christ, and someone tells you it wasn't judgmental enough.

- The music beautifully sets up the sermon on Jesus' gracious example, and someone complains that a new couple was sitting in their pew.
- You lead a tender Communion service, and someone meets you at the door to say there weren't enough new people present that day or there was a typo in the bulletin.

All of it. They missed it all while distracted with the wrong things.

By the way, it was Peter who got the job. You know, the most coveted position in Jesus' kingdom once he was gone. "Upon this rock I will build my church..." said Jesus to Peter. "Feed my sheep," Jesus charged Peter. Peter became the celebrated father of the Apostolic Church. Not James or John. Just saying.

Prayer:

Lord, guide each of us to just once encounter you anew. Help us to focus long enough to listen to what YOU have to say about life, spirit and this world. May our responses betray that we heard you rather than simply... betraying you. Amen.

May 7 - Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

by Dr. Charles Qualls

Prayer and Praise for Deliverance from Enemies

(A Psalm of David)

1 In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. 2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. 3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, 4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. 5 Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

15 My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.
16 Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

Devotion:

I told someone the other day, "You know, I recognize that the anxiety, fear and all manner of other reactions this Covid-19 situation is causing are all real. I get it. Personally, though, I wonder what I'm so thick that I'm missing? Because so far at our house we're sort of taking all this in stride. It is what it is, and we're making our way through it best we can."

Well, not everyone is taking this all in stride. If you are among the anxious and fearful, the depressed and isolated, you are not alone. You have good company, for there are many of you. We talk with you and hear from you. I so desperately want to fix this. I want to make the whole thing go away for you, and I find that obviously I can't. We try to lend

strength where we can, and validate what you are experiencing. I want you to know that you are recognized and accompanied.

Today, this Psalm also lends company of a sort. Here's one way, at least. While the psalmist may not have lived through the Coronavirus, he had lived through tough times. That much is obvious. Right out of the gate, in verses 1-2, we hear a deep inner journey. He has had to reach for God, to seek out God's presence because life has gotten all too real.

If you have prayed, "Rescue me speedily..." you are a person of faith who has lived hard. Something has made nearly every one of us pray that prayer at some point or another.

Let's stop off and visit one line that should have leapt out at you as you were reading this text from Psalm 31. When you heard in v5, "Into your hand I commit my spirit," what did you think? There should have been a voice that said to you, "I've heard that before!" Because you have -- in Luke 23: 46 from the mouth of Jesus our Lord, no less. On the Cross.

God may not always rescue us speedily, at least not by our definition of "speedily." However, into God's hands we truly can commit our spirits. God does uphold us. God does visit grace upon even our toughest, darkest days. God will show up at the moment of our deepest need, even if not always when we'd like. Seek your refuge as you need.

Prayer:

Lord, into your hand we commit our spirits. May it be so. In these days when we simply don't have control over things as we'd like, still you are there. Be with us. Walk with us. Accompany us, we pray. In your time, may we see what you have been doing the whole time. Amen.