

Always There Ahead of Us

A sermon by the Rev. Ronald D. Gerber

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Albany, N.Y.

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Risen Lord, Come stand among us,
Awaken us to your presence,
Open to us the gate of glory,
Show us the path of life,
Help us to know you are with us now and always.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit:

Margaret Wise Brown is the author of various Children's books. And one of her most delightful is *The Runaway Bunny*. It's the story of a little bunny who dreams about running away from home, only to find "home" wherever he ends up. His mother doesn't stop the little bunny running away, but she does not leave him either. When he climbs a tree, Mother takes the shape of the tree. When he travels the ocean, the wind is Mother. When he climbs a mountain, Mother climbs to where he is. When he joins the circus, the trapeze artist is Mother. When he becomes a crocus in a garden, Mother becomes the gardener. When he becomes a bird, Mother becomes the tree he flies home to. Finally, Bunny gets the point. "Aw shucks!" he says, "I might just as well stay home and be your little bunny." Which he does. And Mother Bunny says, "Good. Have a carrot."

The story is, I think, a wonderful image of our relationship with God. It's an image of home. And the 23rd Psalm, which we read/sang this morning, is also an image of God as home. God is both shepherd who knows his sheep by name, and God is host who prepares food and presides at table. God is pasture and valley, dwelling place and protection, guardian and care-giver, still water and open gate, healing oil and a cup running over. The images suggest nourishment, sustenance and life. So whatever the circumstances of our lives, God is with us, and we are at home with God. So even the most difficult of days and trying situations are infused with abundant life and maybe even some joy, besides.

But what, indeed, is home? We no longer live a rooted life where we spend all our days in one house or neighborhood. We move about, change addresses and acquaintances pursuing the needs and demands of jobs and careers, interests and families. So home means more than a piece of land or a house built upon it. It suggests at the very least, knowing where we belong and to whom.

Today Psalm 23 is a common and popular choice for a funeral — something familiar and comforting in a most difficult, distressful and uncertain time — suggesting both the eternal care and love given to the deceased, and the present comfort of those left

to grieve. But in the early years of the Church, the 23rd Psalm was understood as something different. Instead of connecting it with funerals, it was used at Baptism to celebrate the bringing of new Christians into the Church and making them a part of the community — the “green pastures” was their time of instruction; the “still waters” was Baptism itself; the restoration of the soul was the infusing power of the Spirit; the path of righteousness was the new life of faithfulness lived out in ways that would be beneficial to others in the community; the oil was the chrism poured on the head of the Baptized, making them Christ’s own forever; and the “prepared table and overflowing cup” was the Eucharist, the community eating and drinking together in the presence of the risen Christ. In this older use of the shepherd psalm, emphasis was on the communal life of the sheepfold — one flock, many sheep, one shepherd. So I guess it was a sort of proclamation: You are not alone. You are home. Together we share a common life, made possible, enlivened by the Spirit of God through Baptism. In the Church, we know to whom we belong, and where. But the reality is that home, no matter how you identify it, can be pretty chaotic.

At its best, the Anglican Communion has always been a community of diverse opinions and often contradictory positions. How we work at living with God and loving God, how we work at loving each other and living with each other in this home of ours is a struggle never completely resolved. And our Anglican or Episcopal expression of Christianity has usually honored and respected and sometimes even encouraged that struggle. Sometimes in our strife and our struggle we do some pretty silly things and create nearly impossible tension for ourselves — a tension that can stretch us to our limits. But that tension is alike a taut string that when it is plucked produces a beautiful tone. The tension we have with each other over a variety of issues and concerns allows us to resonate with the fullness of God and can bring to us glimpses of truth we might not otherwise have realized. Anglicans have always been of a mind that a diversity of voices in conversation can yield more insight than a single voice talking to itself or making judgmental proclamations.

Apart from the Nicene and Apostles Creeds, Anglican Christianity has never been given to compelling belief — one certain way of looking at things — and has been blessedly free of any concern that belief must be nailed down and everyone made to toe the line. As Anglicans, we are encouraged to listen to each other and our individual experiences as human beings and to hear in our diversity the voice of God and there know God’s presence.

In fact, not everyone, however, would agree with that. Last summer, when the General Convention confirmed Gene Robinson as a Bishop for the whole church, I suspect just about everyone was surprised. But our surprise has been expressed in different ways that continue to keep unfolding months later. The debate is far from over and continues to intensify. Consider: Some of us welcomed Bishop Robinson’s confirmation as a good and positive thing which would have far reaching implications for the good of the Church. Others were, I suspect, shocked or disappointed or embarrassed — perhaps even angry — to realize how fuzzy the boundaries of Anglicanism really are, or, as our Rector Mary has put it, when she speaks of just how diverse Episcopalians are, she says it is truly a “glorious messiness.” I like that: a truly glorious mess, now of course revealed publicly for the whole world to see.

For some, their reaction can be described with one loaded word: fundamentalism.

Priest and author, Bill Countryman, defined fundamentalism like this: “Fundamentalism confuses the means with the end, mistakes the tools with which God reaches out to humanity for the God who reaches out.”

For Anglicans, fundamentalism takes many forms:

- It may proclaim a particular edition of the Book of Common Prayer (usually either 1662 or 1928) as the definitive expression of how Anglicans worship and against which all others must be judged.
- It may hold to a doctrine of ordination that restricts ordained ministry to heterosexual males.
- It may believe in God’s eternal disfavor towards folks unlike oneself.

Folks who hold these and other fundamental positions sometimes say they do so to protect God. But the truth is they are really trying to protect themselves. (As far as I know God has never needed or wanted or asked for our protection. She has, since the beginning, done a pretty good job of protecting herself.)

But the most serious expression of fundamentalism has to do with the Bible and how we read, use and understand scripture. The Prayer Book says: (I quote) “We understand the meaning of the Bible by the help of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church in the true interpretation of the scriptures.” (page 854) — one of the tools God uses to reach out to us. Fundamentalism, however, would make the Bible more absolute than truth, wiser than Jesus and more certain than even God. For God, after all, is reported to change his mind on occasion. Sheep we may be, but we still have been gifted to think for ourselves and to welcome the Holy Spirit to inspire us to discern the presence and activity of God in scripture, in the life of the Church and in the sacraments, and also in our own diverse and peculiar lives and other unlikely places and situations. And I believe the Prayer Book supports that. Now the enormous challenge facing the whole church, regardless of whether one agrees with the actions of General Convention or not, is how to best bring glory to God — how best to put Christ into the center of our lives as individuals and as Church. Even as we continue to struggle with each other over the implications of General Convention — even in this — giving glory to God is possible. And it will happen, and indeed, is already happening, when we keep our attention focused on the reality of God’s presence, give ourselves over to the surprises of God in our midst, and permit nothing, however sacred or venerable, to stand on a level with God, who gives his own self to us in grace. Truth is, we do not own, control or shape the grace of God. Even God possesses it only in order to give it away. The most we can hope for our church is that it will continue to be home, a hospitable place, where the great promises of the shepherd psalm are made real and possible for all. God works in us and with us and through us not because of our literal or excellent grasp of scripture or doctrine or liturgy, not because we are particularly faithful or sacrificial or loving, but only because God is generosity and God is grace. Being at home with God means knowing nothing for certain except God’s grace in Christ and Jesus’ promises in today’s Gospel that his sheep will never ultimately perish, even when faced with the greatest challenges to faith and life. For he assures us no one can snatch us out of the hand of God. Home is the place where God continually surprises us by just how diverse and fulfilling life can be.

The poet, W. H. Auden wrote: “. . . About catastrophe or how to behave in one, what do I know?, except what everyone knows . . . If there when grace dances, I should dance.” And maybe we can learn to do that together: to dance where God already dances. Remember Mother Bunny? No matter where her little one went or in what form, she provided home, taking on ever new shapes and forms though always remaining his Mother, whatever his circumstances.

George Herbert, writing his poetry back in the 17th century from his little rural parish of St. Andrew outside Salisbury, England, wrote in one of his Easter Poems of getting up early on Easter Morning to prepare for the celebration, only to find Christ was already there. And, Herbert said, his preparations became insignificant and presumptuous in the brilliant light of the experience of the resurrection.

Just so, Christ Jesus the shepherd is always there ahead of us, creating home for us, creating home for all of us, with better provisions than we could ever imagine.