Invitation to the Table

In Exodus is the story of the Children of Israel, leaving Egypt; crossing the Red Sea, enduring the heat of the desert and the plundering bands of Bedouin tribesmen. There had been poisoned water holes; they ran out of food....

And then at the end of the fifteenth chapter there is this little verse, tucked away so that you almost miss it: EXO 15:27 *Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.* (NIV)

After the heat and dust and hardships of the desert, at Elim they found shade trees and cool water; they found rest.

There is a difference between rest and escape. Escape is running away because we don't want to be responsible or accountable. Rest is built into the created order of things.

In this place you hear a lot about being called and sent—about ministering and serving. We push the "sign-up" table and look at ways to be involved. Sometimes in our emphasis on being a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, we forget to take care of ourselves. We forget to rest.

At this table we respond to the invitation of Christ: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."* (MATTHEW 11:28)

Our Communion Hymn is #429, "You Satisfy the Hungry Heart"

Pastoral Prayer

Today's Gospel reading calls us to prayer:

JOHN 10:1-5 (NRSVUE) *"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."*

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, in your resurrection you not only were raised but also returned to us, sought us out, spoke to us, opened yourself up to us. You became for us a door, a gate through which we see, in your life and work, the glory of God, the active love of God made manifest in us and for us. Through you we enter the presence of God.

Give us grace to enter that door, strengthen our willpower to move toward you, as you already have moved toward us. Empower us to knock on the door in response to your invitation, to return your embrace. And then spur us on to show others the way so that, together, all God's children may walk through your open door with us. Amen.

Refilling the Gas Tank

PSALM 23 (NRSVUE)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters; [Hebrew: "waters of rest"]
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.

JOHN 10:11-15 (NRSVUE) *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* 12 *The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.* 13 *The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.* 14 *I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me,* 15 *just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.*
The Word of God for the people of God!

We had been to Egypt, had climbed through a narrow passageway to the burial chamber in the Great Pyramid, had taken the obligatory camel ride, strolled around the Sphinx and enjoyed a wonderful sunset sail on the Nile. Then we flew to Amman, Jordan to spend the night before crossing the Jordan River into Israel at Jericho.

The hotel was very comfortable, the weather was beautiful, and we were on the second floor with a balcony, so we slept with the windows open. Early the next morning I was awakened by the tinkling of bells. I stepped out on the balcony and there below on a grassy slope was a young shepherdess and maybe a dozen sheep, grazing peacefully. Obviously, the serenity of that sunrise scene brought the 23rd Psalm and John 10 to mind.

It may be the most beautiful metaphor in the Bible: YHWH and Jesus as shepherd, and the wonderful relationship of trust between the sheep and the shepherd. Helpless and vulnerable, they depend on the shepherd for nourishment, protection, and guidance. If there's a threat the shepherd places himself between the sheep and the aggressor to ward off not only destruction but also exploitation. The psalmist speaks for the sheep: *"You are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me"*

A brief side bar here regarding the shepherd's rod: PROVERBS 13:24, *"Spare the rod*

and spoil the child…" has been used at least since the Puritans in the 16th and 17th centuries, to justify corporal punishment of children, from spanking to beatings.

I won't dwell on the Puritan theological rationale based on Augustine's original sin and reinforced in Calvin's Penal Substitutionary Atonement, but see, here's the thing: the "rod" is the shepherd's rod, which is an instrument of rescue and guidance, not punishment. The crook is used to pull a sheep out of a ditch or a thicket, and the shepherd reaches out with the rod to gently nudge a straying sheep back toward the flock. The rod was not used to strike or punish sheep. My point is not to condemn or condone physical punishment of children (although I'm willing to have that conversation), but to correct the misuse of Scripture to justify it. ***"…your rod and your staff—they comfort me"***

On the other hand, one who represents a threat to the sheep might, indeed, experience the Puritan application of the shepherd's rod!

In the reading from John's gospel, the shepherd pays a price to ensure the safety of the sheep. The shepherd is abused, even puts his own life on the line for the sheep. Their safety is not attained without risk; and the opposition often is violent.

There's a message there for our time of chaos, conflict, and moral bankruptcy, when Christians bow down before false and fallible gods and leaders rule by whim, violence, and destruction.

In the valley of the shadow of death, Psalm 23 acknowledges both external and internal threat that seems to be the human destiny, and recognizes that God is with us in times when leaders abandon reason and embrace death rather than life in public policy. God prepares a table for us, anoints us, and guides us. And even when we are sheltering in place, our cup can run over, and a feast of beauty, love, and creativity is set before us in the presence of all that threatens us. Psalm 23 is an extension of the promise to Abraham: "You and all your descendants will be blessed in order to be a blessing."

That affirmative message of Psalm 23 is reinforced in John's Good Shepherd passage, "I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly."

Sometimes I get so caught up living and working and fretting about world situations that I let the tank get really low. Jo Lynn and I loved to travel with her parents when they were alive. Joe was the consummate trip planner and guide and always had a wonderful itinerary; Juanita was our gas gauge monitor. When the gauge hit half, she started to fret. The good news is that, with her in the car, we never ran out of gas!

Most of us would be better off if we were a bit more attentive to the gauge on our life's dashboard—if we paid more attention to the ongoing fatigue, the consistent aches and pains, the daily stress and anxiety over schedules and deadlines, the upswing in irritability… That's not the abundant life the Good Shepherd offers.

American consumption of valium increased 67% over the past decade, and with only 4.6% of the world's population, Americans consume 80% of the global supply of

opioids—a consumption rate that makes headlines and has been declared a crisis. 75% of Americans experience physical or emotional symptoms of stress, and roughly 1/3 suffer from clinically diagnosed anxiety disorders. A lot of us are running on fumes!

Now, all of us occasionally experience circumstances beyond our control, but most of us could do a better job of watching the gas gauge. I have enormous difficulty accepting that my body is 84 years old, because my mind and my ambitions still operate at a 34-year-old level! If I take a day off to rest or play, it takes me two weeks to catch up. You know what I'm saying? So my tank gets pretty low sometimes.

The master architect of the universe designed all of creation to run on cycles of replenishment: night and day, summer/fall/winter/spring, and this for humans: ***"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.*** (EXODUS 20:8-11)

I know: I don't do a very good job of that, either.

So, who is *your* shepherd? Does your shepherd make you lie down in green pastures, or make you repurpose the pasture for a more productive use? Does your shepherd lead you beside still waters (the Hebrew word literally means "waters of rest"), or add another project to the list that's already out of control? Does your shepherd restore your soul, or leave you worrying about things over which you have no control?

The main difference between sheep and humans is that we can choose our shepherd. And yet, even when we choose the right shepherd, if we don't follow him, we tend to get in trouble. We consistently need the comfort of the shepherd's rod and staff.

Two thoughts keep coming to mind: (1) "The hurrier I go the behinder I get," and (2) Bill Hybel's book, *Too Busy Not to Pray*. And see, here's the thing: (and I'm assuming there's enough of you like me that it's worth saying) prayer is what refills the gas tank.

And what I discover is that the more time I spend in prayer, the more time I have for the things I need to do and want to do. Discipline breeds discipline; a sharper focus eliminates some of the distractions.

We tend to think of prayer as "talking to God." What if we stopped talking long enough to listen? To be still and know who God is and what God is like and what God is already doing in our lives to empower us to be all we are created to be.

So, for me, and maybe for you, the question of the century is, "Why am I not spending more time with my Shepherd? Why do I keep trying to run on an empty tank?"

Duh. Pray with me.