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April 25, 2021-Easter 4

I reached a milestone in the pandemic yesterday. After being separated for over a year because of COVID, I was finally able to gather outdoors with a small group of friends that I've been sharing playdates with and seeking parenting wisdom from for almost ten years. And as we sat around the fire, our conversation turned somehow to the church. I say somehow...I am sure that my friends will tell you that they long for the time when we might get together and our conversation *does not* turn to the church.

But anyway...we were discussing how our older kids felt about God and the Christian faith. And I was trying to articulate why it mattered to me that my kids grow up being part of a faith community—why it would matter to me even if I weren't a priest. I said something about the Gospel message that calls us to give back to the world. To not see ourselves as the center where our desires come first, but instead as needing to work for the justice of all, particularly the poor and oppressed.

And that's true. I do want them to grow into adults who see their responsibility to give back to the world. But as I was reading the Gospel and the Psalm for today, I remembered the power of the image of the Good Shepherd, and I realized how much I want that for my kids, as well. Because understanding Jesus, and therefore God, as the Good Shepherd gives us an awareness of God who is a steady, eternal, and unchanging force of love and compassion. And they will need that in their lives. We all need that.

We need the God that has held us through the struggles of the past year and continues to hold us. It's strange. Even though in many ways, we are seeing our way forward in this pandemic because more and more people are being vaccinated and fewer people are dying. At least in our country. The fear and anxiety are still palpable for me as I am sure it is for many of you.

Yesterday, I hit another pandemic milestone as our family celebrated a belated Easter and Sarah's birthday with my mom and her partner now that they are fully vaccinated. And that was wonderful, but there's still that lingering anxiety. You can't go from a year of hyper caution to being relaxed overnight. And we know that in most of our interactions we still need to be very cautious.

We just got the call yesterday that our local schools have decided to postpone the return of older students to four days a week because of concerns over community transmission of COVID. And I suspect they may have to postpone their return even longer as many families return from traveling and the potential for more cases grows. My kids were incredibly disappointed by this news. They miss school. They miss their friends.

For all of us, there's this communal fatigue as the pandemic drags on with all its restrictions and anxiety. And then on top of that we add a nation still struggling with racial equality and justice. A struggle we can see that will be with us for a while. Progress toward justice is real but it is slow and laced with more tragedies it seems. There is hardly time to breathe a sigh of relief when justice seems to prevail like in the conviction of Derek Chauvin. Because we see in the news that one guilty verdict does not mean other people of color will not die at the hands of law enforcement, too often

without cause. And then on top of racial justice concerns, we have growing wealth inequality to worry about and a climate crisis. It's exhausting.

There's no doubt that we need a demanding God that pushes us toward the cause of justice. That calls out for the oppressed. Because the injustice of the world causes so much pain and suffering.

But when the suffering of the world becomes too much to bear, we need the comfort of the Good Shepherd. I feel that today more than ever. We can't expect the Good Shepherd to hold back the suffering of the world from us, but we sometimes need to rest in the love and protection that the Good Shepherd promises.

When I think of the Good Shepherd and his sheep, I think of God knowing each and every one of us and calling us by name. Imagine God knowing and caring for every created being since the beginning of time. Knowing and naming and caring for *all* creation, in fact. It's mind boggling, but that's the miraculous power of our God.

We need the Good Shepherd who will embrace all of humanity, who calls to each of us and invites us into the flock. A shepherd who lays down his life for the oppressed, the poor, and the downtrodden. But also lays down his life for the oppressor and the perpetrator—seeing their pain, even when we cannot, and holding out the possibility of grace and reconciliation.

We need the Good Shepherd who loves us so much that he suffers when the world suffers. When philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff lost his twenty-five-year old son, he wrote a lengthy lament and these words of his about suffering have always spoken to my heart. He said,

“God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. ... It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live. I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it meant that no one could see his sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor. ... Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it.”<sup>1</sup>

We know that we cannot bear our own suffering or the suffering of the world without love. The Good Shepherd shows us that God is sharing in that suffering even as it remains unexplained and heart-wrenching.

Most weeks at the end of my sermon, I give you a charge. Go forth and do something.... But today, I want to give you an invitation. When the weight of the world feels heavy, when anxiety and fear and the suffering of the world feel like burdens impossible to bear, take a moment to rest in the abiding love of the Good Shepherd. Hear his voice call your name and be comforted. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Lament for a Son,” 1987.