

“Believing and Belonging”

John 10:1-8

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One upon a time, twins were conceived in the same womb. Time passed as the two dormant lives developed. Their brains grew in capacity and they began to develop feeling, and with feeling they developed perception; a perception of their surroundings, and an essential awareness of themselves. And each of the twins began slowly to become aware of the other.

Their first impression about conditions in the womb was that life was good, and they laughed and rejoiced, the one saying, "Lucky are we to have been conceived, and to have this world as our home," and the other agreed, "Blessed be the Mother who gave us this life and each other."

Let me pause here a minute to assure my friend Jack [who is 8 years old and quite the literalist and cynic] that this is a “fable.” Little people in their mother’s womb do not talk to one another—at least I’m pretty sure that they don’t.

Anyway,

Each began to grow arms and fingers, legs and toes. They explored their world. At some point one of them found the cord which gave them life from the precious Mother's blood. So they sang, "How great is the love of the Mother who shares all she has with us!" And they were pleased and satisfied with their lot.

Weeks passed into months, and with the advent of each new month, they noticed a change in each other, and each began to see changes in themselves. "We are changing," said the one. "What can it mean?"

"It means," replied the other, "that we are drawing near to birth." An unsettling chill crept over the two, and they both grew afraid, for they knew that birth meant leaving their lovely comfortable world behind.

The boy said, "Were it up to me, I would live here forever."

"We must be born," said the girl. "It has happened to all others who were here." For indeed there was evidence of life there before, as the Mother had borne others."

“But, do you suppose,” asked the girl, “that there might be life after birth?”

"How can there be life after birth?" cried the little boy. "Do we not shed this life cord and all our nutrition? And have you ever talked to one that has been born? Has anyone ever re-entered the womb after birth? NO!"

The little boy fell into despair and in his despair for he had been reading a lot of existentialist literature (for yea, verily, there was a great library in this womb!). Then he moaned, "If the purpose of conception and all our growth is that it be ended in birth, then truly our life is absurd." Resigned to despair, he reached out into the darkness clutched his precious

life cord to his chest said, "if this is so, and life is absurd, then there really can be no Mother."

"But there is a Mother," protested the girl. "Who else gave us nourishment and all that we have in our world?"

"We get our own nourishment, and our world has always been here." said the boy. "And if there is a Mother, where is she? Have you ever seen her? Does she ever talk to you? NO! We invented the Mother because it satisfied a need in us. It made us feel secure and happy. There is no mother, really."

Thus while the boy raved on in his existential despair, the other resigned herself to just being born, and she placed her trust in the hands of the Mother. Hours moved into days, and days into final weeks. And it came to pass that the two should be delivered. Both knew their birth was at hand, and both feared what they did not know.

They cried as they were born into the light. And they coughed out fluid and gasped the dry air. And when they were sure they had been born, they opened their eyes. And seeing for the first time, they found themselves cradled in the arms of Mother! They lay open-mouthed and awe-struck before that beauty and truth they could not previously have hoped to have known or understood..

--Author Unknown

I've always found it interesting that in the church in which I grew up there was a painting just to the left of the chancel—on the side of the church on which I always sat. It was a painting of Jesus the Good Shepherd. He was walking along with the sheep following along behind. Cradled safely in his arms is a new born lamb. It's an image of such comfort and hope, especially in troubled and confused times.

This is interesting because in our church here in Waukesha there was a stained glass window depicting the same exact scene and in the same part of the church—on the left hand side as you faced the front of the church.

This painting I grew up with, always bore to me through my troubled teen years a sense that when no one else could *possibly* love me, Jesus, the Good Shepherd would *always* love me. Because he knew me even better than I knew myself. The Church taught me that about him and it is a lesson that is wedded to the most hidden and inward parts of my soul.

The painting was not great art, I confess. But it was a great assurance of the shepherding presence of God when I couldn't trust in the love or presence of any other.

I don't mean to suggest that my adolescence was all that oppressive or horrible. I just think that most teenagers go through moments in which they have serious doubts about who

loves them or whether or not they are worthy to be loved by anybody at all. Most of us get through that period for the most part and that painting helped me greatly through that process.

Still, I don't think that the issues go away entirely.

This is why this metaphor of the Good Shepherd is just so compelling even as we grow older in the faith. There is always and everywhere this compelling question before us, "Is there a God? And if there is a God, does he care about me?"

That painting reinforced what my dear Sunday School teachers wanted most to teach me. That even if no one else could find a way to express their love for you, Jesus would always love you. When you get lost Jesus would find you. Even if you walked away on purpose, Jesus would even leave the entire flock to come and get you. Jesus' love for you is fierce and endless. He will not let you go even when you want to be let go of.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

"There is nothing I can do to make him love me more; and there is nothing I can do to make him love me less." (Philip Yancey).

Like the twins in the parable, we know in our heart of hearts that life is a great unarticulated mess of endings and beginnings.

However, if we're honest with ourselves, every ending brings the worry that there will be no more beginnings. Like the little boy in the womb, we worry that there is no life after birth.

What we really want to be assured of in the final analysis is that we will be loved throughout the whole process; shepherded through every ending and beginning by a good shepherd whose love can be trusted regardless of what happens.

The poet and novelist, Annie Dillard, grew up in a middle class world in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her father was a businessman, she describes him as "a lapsed Presbyterian and a believing Republican." Her household was one in which will power and the enlightened mind meant everything. She thought that she could forestall any catastrophic changes in her life by sheer force of will and a well educated mind.

She writes:

Time itself bent you and cracked you on its wheel. We were getting ready to move out of our house again. I knew I could not forever keep riding my bike backward into ever-older neighborhoods to look at the ever-older houses in which I lived. [these times of change were difficult for young Annie. She tried to memorize the layout of this most recent house, but she couldn't force it into her mind while she was still living there].

She continues:

I saw already that I could not in good faith renew the increasingly desperate series of vows by which I had always tried to direct my life. I had vowed to love Walter Milligan forever; now I could recall neither his face nor my feeling, but only this [once] urgent vow. I had vowed to keep exploring Pittsburgh by bicycle no matter how old I got, and planned an especially sweeping tour for my hundredth birthday in 2045. I had vowed to keep hating [my sister] Amy in order to defy my Mother, who kept prophesying I would someday not hate Amy. In short, I always vowed one way or another, not to change. Not me. I needed the fierceness of vowing because I could scarcely help but notice,.. [all the vast changes all around me].” [An American Childhood, p. 172-73.]

Endings and beginnings can be terrifying, especially when you’ve never been through them before which is usually the case with teenagers generally, but especially those whose families are moving or going through a divorce or death.

I have to believe that when things in my life change, as they inevitably must, and even when that most ultimate of changes--death itself comes, that Jesus will love me and shepherd me through that process and whatever it is that happens on the other side of the changes that face me, will be good and trustworthy despite my enormous inability to grasp what is going on.

Because this good shepherd even goes so far as to lay down his life for the sheep under his loving care.

The Good Shepherd will see me through even death itself. And what lies ahead will be always be good. I can trust that.

And I’ve believed that from the first moment I saw that painting in the church of my childhood—St. John’s Church in Mokena, Illinois.

And I hope that there is such a window in the church of my late adulthood.

To remind me that He is the good shepherd who knows his sheep and whom the sheep know intimately even when they doubt and are troubled of heart and soul. Somewhere in the depths of our minds and soul we know that God loves us deeply, truly and beyond our imagining.

And that is the end of the story as well as its beginning.

Praise be to God.

Amen