Sermon for Choir Sunday;

April 3, 2011

The Lord is my Shepherd. Is He yours?

When I was in high school during the summer between 10th and 11th Grade I was honored by being chosen along with approximately two hundred other high school students to be a charter member of the All Ohio Youth choir. The experience of singing with that many really talented voices was great but I think we all agreed that the best part of being a part of that choir was spending 10 days at the state fair for free. A few of us were fortunate enough to serve in the choir for a second year as well.

Each morning we all ate breakfast together in a massive dining hall after which we went to various rooms for rehearsals either in sections or as choir one or two. Having two choirs allowed us to sing in two different locations on the fairgrounds during the day. After the morning and afternoon rehearsals we had free time to visit the exhibits, ride the rides and eat fair food. Lots of fair food. Curly fries and Hot sausages were among my favorites and still are. After three days of rehearsal we began our twice daily concerts. At night we had a regular curfew. In the dorm by 10:00pm and in bed by 11:00pm. We really needed to sleep because our schedule was very exhausting.

Across the street from our dorm was the sheep barn. When the wind was blowing our way you’d pick up a certain smell from the barn. One of my friends, a practical joker named Larry, decided that it would be really funny to demonstrate his sheep impersonations after we were all in bed. 11:00, 12:00, 1:00 nothing could be heard but our breathing, the loud snoring of our director and an occasional passing truck.

All of a sudden the silence was broken by a Loud Baaa, Baaa. We were awake and giggling and again Larry did his Baaa, Baaa. This happened several nights in a row until our director was able to catch him in the act. Quick as a flash Mr. Thomas grabbed Larry out of bed and told him to get dressed. Larry was taken across the street and told he’d have to shovel out the stalls before he could come back for breakfast. The next morning as we gathered for breakfast, a very filthy and dare I say sheepish looking Larry was paraded before us. “Do you have anything to say,” our director asked. We waited for his apology and then it came. Baaaa. Larry went home that day.

For anyone who has ever visited a county or state fair in the Midwest, especially in an agricultural state like Ohio or Indiana, one thing that is always impressive are the number of farm animals that you can see. The 4H club members and Future Farmers of America groups raise their own animals and show them at the fair. They feed them, wash them, groom them and sleep in the barns on a bale of hay next to the animal’s stall. Much like we pictured shepherds staying with the flock and taking care of them, so too do these dedicated young farmers.

I thought about that story as I was preparing for this service. A couple of weeks ago Pastor Steve told the Children that the word pastor is a reference to shepherd. When Ministers are ordained in the UCC it is as Pastor and teacher. The Pastor leads his flock, caring for them and comforting them in their time of need throughout the bible we read references to Shepherds. David the shepherd who slew Goliath, Shepherds abiding in their fields are two that easily come to mind. In my Bible Thesaurus there are at least 50 references to shepherds on one page alone.

When I was child in Sunday school we learned the King James version of the 23rd psalm. That’s the version that goes “Surely good Mrs. Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life…” As a youngster I wasn’t really sure if I wanted Mrs. Murphy to follow me around. I thought that she might be a little scary. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if I ran into her. Perhaps it was just a small child’s fear of the unknown.

This shepherd’s psalm as it is sometimes called is often read at memorial services. It has been set to music by countless composers. Today I sang it in an arrangement by Antonin Dvorak the Czech composer. The psalm means different things to all who hear it and read it. It’s had a special place in my life for as long as I can remember.
I was privileged to be part of the cast of “Trumpet in the Land” on three separate occasions. Trumpet” is an outdoor historical drama that takes place every summer in the Schoenbrunn amphitheater in New Philadelphia, Ohio. It recreates the sad story of the brutal massacre of a group of Christian Delaware Indians of the Moravian faith in 1782 in the nearby village of Gnadenhutten. During the tragic and graphic scene which represents the killing of the entire village, many of the actors, as they knelt to receive the death blows, were so often caught up in the emotion of the moment that they recited the Lord’s prayer or the 23rd Psalm as part of the scene. It was totally adlibbed and quite powerful. When the silence fell at the end of that scene and fires were rising on stage from the burning village, we could often hear muffled sobs from the audience because of the power of what had been witnessed.

For my first two seasons I played the role of Abraham an elderly Mohawk Indian who was the shepherd of that flock in the absence of their minister, Rev. David Zeisburger. Historically it is believed that he was the first to die. The Psalm has other significance for me. It reminds me of a very special place that I found many years ago when I was on vacation. There is a boulder at the summit of a rocky hill where I like to sit in the evening. Marilou went there with me this past summer and we sat there at dusk as the sun went down over South Mountain. When the air is clear you can see a beautiful array of colors in the distance as the sun sets. Sometimes if there are a few clouds you get an amazing display of purple and orange, yellow and pink as the sun reflects off of the bottoms of the clouds. In those last few minutes before we say goodbye to the daylight, one can feel a sense of peace come over you. In past visits there, a refreshing gentle breeze can sometimes be felt as it blows along Plum Run Valley. The breeze can be a very welcome thing if it’s been a particularly hot day as it was this past August when we were there. If you’re there as darkness settles in, fireflies will illuminate the night sky and crickets begin to chirp lending their unique rhythm to the music of the night. For few precious moments I revel in the beauty of God’s universe and the words of the Psalm come to my mind. “The Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not want.”

Sitting there on that rocky hillside in Pennsylvania you can often see the green grasses of the surrounding farms. “He makes me lie down in green Pastures.” If the wind is right you can smell the fresh mown hay and wheat and hear the gentle sounds of the babbling brook that runs through the little valley.

“He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul.” The stresses of the day or the week or even the past months often melt away as I relax there and experience the beauty and mystical sensation of that place. I close my eyes and let the sounds, the fresh clean country air and the breeze consume me. I am restored and revived.

In my home town of Ashland, Ohio there is an assisted living facility where one of my aunts lived out her final days. It is called the Good Shepherd Home. It seems to be an appropriate name. The residents there are the flock who are attended to by Christ’s representatives on earth. The doctors, nurses, chaplains and therapists who minister to them care for their daily needs. Jesus like a good shepherd leads us, he calls us by name and “Leads us in the right paths for His name’s sake.”

Peace, quiet, blissful moments of reflection and time for mediation are all a part of my special place. There are others who have experienced the same sensations in that reverent place. Anyone can go there. I don’t hide its location like some people might hide a favorite fishing hole. It’s on the local maps and travel guides and is a stop on the guided National Park service bus tours. The hill is called Little Round Top and the small valley and stream in front of it is called Plum Run Valley. It’s located to the south of a famous town known as Gettysburg.

On July 2nd of 1863 the little stream and the valley acquired a different name. For it was on this spot near the end of the day that a life and death struggle for possession of that piece of rocky real estate took place. At the top of that hill on the far left side of the Union battle line stood a regiment of federal troops from New York who were commanded by 24 year old, Colonel Patrick O’Rourke. Another New York regiment and one from Pennsylvania occupied the next two spots in the line and to the extreme left of the federal line stood the 20th Maine, a regiment commanded by Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain.
The valley below them was anything but quiet that day. As those two colonels stood there with two other regiments between them they heard the distant roar of cannon fire and muskets in a constantly increasing volume as the confederate forces began to climb little round top. The roar of cannon fire and the smell of burning gunpowder took away any sense of the beauty of that place. Below them, in that valley, some men cursed while others prayed, some men yelled or sang at the top of their lungs. Trumpets sounded and drummers kept up a rhythmic beat as the soldiers marched through that valley and began to climb that hill and die by the hundreds. Each of them, North and south, was a human being with their own thoughts, feelings, dreams, wives, sweethearts and families that they left behind. Some fought because they thought it was the right and proper thing to do, some fought to set a people free. Historians can debate the rightness of the conflict and argue over it’s cause but in the end what really matters is that each of these men was a human being. Some men fought there without ever firing a shot. They couldn’t bring themselves to kill a fellow human being. It was a part of their religious beliefs.

On that July afternoon Plum Run Valley earned it’s other name. It became known as the Valley of Death. How many of those soldiers climbed to their death that day with the shepherds psalm on their lips?

I like to visit Plum run Valley and Little Round Top because I feel a sense of peace when I am there. The whole battlefield is a grave yard. Then I think of that Valley. The Valley of Death and once again the words of the psalmist give us comfort. “Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me: your rod and your staff--- they comfort me.”

There is a touching painting by Lloyd Garrison that I saw at a gallery there in Gettysburg. It is also on our bulletin cover. It is called “Lost But Not Forgotten.” It is a very soul stirring picture of a wounded confederate soldier lying with his back against a tree. His right arm lies across his wounded chest. His left arm hangs loosely in an attitude of supplication. It rests on what appears to be a small Bible. The soldier’s head is turned slightly to the left as if he is looking for someone. There is fear and loneliness in those haunted eyes. Behind this young soldier is the almost transparent and yet distinguishable image of the Redeemer with his right hand resting gently on the shoulder of the soldier. He is there at that moment of death, comforting him and leading him home to be with God our Creator.

The rest of the Psalm is also one of assurance. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies: You anoint my head with oil. My cup over flows.” Once again we see Christ the good shepherd taking care of us in the presence of those who would wish us harm. When I think of that painting, I know that the table has been set for this young soldier to join Christ at the heavenly banquet. He will never again have needs, for God will provide in abundance. His Cup will over flow with God’s unending love, and he will find eternal peace and rest in the arms of the Creator.

“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.” In this Lenten season, each of us needs to find time to reflect and meditate on the sacrifice of Christ. In a verse of scripture from John 10, Christ says, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” Jesus the Christ, Our Redeemer, our Comforter cares for us every single day.

Hopefully I’ll get back to Gettysburg again to visit that special place. If I do I hope the night is clear and calm and quiet. I’ll sit there on the crest of the hill near the big rocks, and watch the sun go down behind South Mountain, and feel a cool breeze from the valley below. Perhaps I’ll hear the crickets chirp. I will think of the Hebrew word Shalom, of perfect peace and say a prayer for those went there before. Perhaps I’ll think back to my childhood, to Mrs. Murphy. But I won’t be afraid. For I know that the Lord is my shepherd. Is He yours?