

“Good Shepherds”

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Psalm 23

John 10:1-10

‘He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.’

Psalm 23:2-3

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for those whom you have sent as good shepherds
to guide and sometimes push us along,
and even go looking for us when we get off the track.

Amen

There was a documentary on cable this week about Vince Lombardi
the legendary football coach of the Green Bay Packers.

Now, I don't want to offend anyone's sensibilities about team loyalty
or think I am violating the athletic neutrality of the pulpit,

so this is purely from a theological point of view and
not in any way favoring nor casting aspersions on any team,

but... the final play of the NFL Playoffs at Lambeau Field in 1967
that would take Green Bay to the Super Bowl that year
bordered on the miraculous.

It was called The Ice Bowl – in that, despite heating filaments installed
underground in the playing field,

it was so cold on the day of the game,

that the moisture of the softened ground quickly froze to ice.

Green Bay was 3 points behind and it was 3rd and goal
on their opponents' 2 foot line.

It was make or break and the quarterback Bart Starr called the last time-out
to consult with Coach Lombardi.

Starr told him that they had tried to send the half back up the middle twice,
but he had no traction because of the ice – on the other hand,

as quarterback, he was already standing.

Lombardi said, “Run it!” and added a colorful turn of phrase that meant
“Get us out of here!”

It was all that Bart Starr could do to keep from laughing

as he went back to line – and did a Quarterback Keep to win the game.

Willard, p.2

It was said that the 9 years of Lombardi's coaching with that team culminated in that single event.

It was said about him that he demonstrated how you can't coach anyone, unless you have taught them first – and that is just what he did.

Vince Lombardi was a 'good shepherd' for the men on his team in the sense that he cared for them, guided and cajoled them, and brought out the best in them.

He clearly stated his values, rigorously conditioned his team, had them practice drills so well – especially the 'power sweep', that their opponents could see it coming, but couldn't do anything about it; and he gave them vision – chewing them out, but giving a word of encouragement, too.

He had a transformative affect on his players – getting them to give 100% of their 'abilities'.

He had become for them like that beloved friend you don't want to disappoint.

Lombardi was also a champion against racial prejudice – saying he "...viewed his players as neither black nor white, but Packer green."

He was passionately against discrimination and let the Green Bay business community know that if his team's black players didn't receive the same service as their white teammates, then that establishment would be off-limits to the whole team.

His position on racial prejudice was influenced by faith as a Catholic Christian and his experience of prejudice as an Italian-American.

But his anti-prejudice attitude went beyond being 'color-blind' to include sexual orientation.

An example of this took place when Lombardi was later coaching the Washington Redskins at their training camp in 1969, when Ray Douglas McDonald – who was gay, was trying to make the team.

Lombardi told his running back coach to work hard with McDonald and then said,

"...if I hear one of you people make reference to his manhood you'll be out of here... [adding a colorful phrase of emphasis]..."

In this case, Lombardi's Catholic teachings – with regard to sexual orientation, were relegated to his personal attitude against prejudice in any form.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vince_Lombardi

Willard, p.3

Well, sports fans, I'm sure you appreciated that recap –
Everybody else, I'm not so sure.

I don't usually follow sports myself,

but I found this story about Vince Lombardi to be so compelling
He was a wonderful model for what it can mean to be a good shepherd
as somebody who combines principle and practice,
leadership and example for bringing out the best in someone.

This is the exact opposite of how cults work to exploit the vulnerable –
especially young men with no job and no purpose to their life.

I remember the media reported years ago about a video
of Osama bin Laden sitting around with his inner circle cronies
and mocking those he sent out on the suicide missions of 9/11.

This in sharp contrast with Vince Lombardi

even though the team had to do things his way – or it was the highway.
Jerry Kramer was one of those players who Lombardi
could get pretty rough with in his criticism
and did that one day on the practice field.

At the end of the day, Kramer was sitting on a bench in the locker room
very dejected when Lombardi came up to him and said,
“Someday, you're going to be the best guard in football.”

That was a transformative event for Jerry Kramer
and played out in practice and on the field at game-time.

It was like Jesus saying to Peter the Fisherman – whose nickname was ‘Rocky’,
“On this rock, I will build my church.”

If it can be said that anything about Vince Lombardi could be subtle,
it was in the distinction Jerry Kramer made in saying
that as a player, he wouldn't give 100% of his energy –
he would always hold something back.

But what Coach Lombardi asked for – and got from his players
was 100% of their ability.

He helped them to be the best they could be.

To be who you are to the best of your ability not just for your sake,
but for your team – even for the benefit of the world.

Isn't that the salvation – the liberation that the whole world
groans for and denies one another,
yet could so simply be achieved by the hard work
helping people to become themselves.

Willard, p.4

Jesus said to Peter when they first met,

“On this rock, I will build my church.”

And after the events of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion and Peter’s denial,
when they were together again on the beach by the fire,

Jesus said to Peter,

“Feed my lambs, Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

The fisherman – as it turned out, was really a shepherd.

By the way, the lineman who helped make the critical block
for Bart Starr in the Quarterback Keep

that scored the winning touchdown at The Ice Bowl
was Jerry Kramer.

Mary Helen New, Kathleen Overly, Joanne Bateman, MaryAnn Neder,
Toni Signoretti are among many others in our church

who are running interference, taking people to the doctor,
buying groceries, keeping in touch regularly, praying and providing
hope at critical times, bringing prayer shawls and
scoring touchdowns for people of our congregation
who have been in need.

There is more I need to do to better equip our “Good Shepherds”
with training, because you can’t coach someone
unless they have been taught first.

We have come so far as a congregation in our first year together –
like having a Shepherds ‘Called to Care’ Program.

We can do better as we learn how to do our best.

Amen.

Psalm 23

Our Jewish scripture lesson today is a familiar one. The 23^d Psalm may even be one you know by heart. If so, please say it along with me...

The LORD is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever .

Amen

John 10:1-10

[Jesus said,]

10:1 '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.

2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.'

6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them,

'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

9I am the gate.

Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.