

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

May 7, 2006

Pr. Robert M. Goldstein

"God Is"

Texts: John 10:11-18; Psalm 23

So Jesus is the good shepherd! How we love that image! And how we all love the 23rd Psalm about God being our shepherd! The only problem is -- how many of us really know shepherds? One shepherd? A part-time shepherd? A cyber shepherd?

Rare indeed. Coming from Australia where there were at least 20 sheep for every Australian, I didn't know a shepherd either or even a sheep. I did know lamb. Mom served it up once or twice a week.. So how come we like the idea of shepherds so much?

Both the Gospel reading and the 23rd Psalm communicate to us that a shepherd is protective, caring and gentle with sheep. And so we are drawn to the truths that God is protective, gentle and caring. As St. John says, "The Good Shepherd lays down her life for the sheep." That's how much the Christ and the God who created all really care and love us. This is the God of whom we speak and, hopefully, live by grace. This is our picture of God we paint with our words, our hymns and our lives as God gives us the grace.

I have to add the qualification "as God gives us the grace" because I know that I don't always live so gratefully and gracefully. Sometimes when I get behind the wheel.... I forget myself. So let's not get too proud of our humility!

While in Australia I worked on a paper on the existence of God. You know, just a minor relaxing thing to do on a vacation. Even though the fruits of that work are not complete, I want to say something rather odd. I am going to discuss a topic in the pulpit that I was taught did not belong here: talking about the existence of God. Put it in a lecture, put it in a classroom setting, but not in a sermon were the counsel of my peers.

But times have changed. The average Joan or Joe on the street has an opinion on the question -- and from what I often hear not always an affirming one. It also puzzles Christians and others of deep spirituality, and some are afraid to ask it for fear that their friends or pastor might think less of them. Actually, I'd think more of them!

It's gone to such a low point that even the comedians get laughs from lines like "There must be a God." In one of my favorite movies, Torch Song Trilogy, Harvey Fierstein, as the torch singer Arnold, drags home, with the help of a grumbling New York taxi driver, the passed out and adorable Matthew Broderick. They lay him on a bed to sleep off his inebriation. As Arnold covers Matthew with a blanket, he adores this handsome sleeping lamb, admittedly drunken lamb, he utters the words, "There is a God." Humor. Really genuinely deep humor.

So times have changed. And the question is humorous because it is precisely deep and important: "Does God exist?"

My proposal to you is, "No. God does not exist. God has never existed. God just is. God will always be "is". Your car exists because you can go out and point to it -- unless it has been stolen and chopped up in some gangster garage. Then, your car would not exist. Cars, like us, come into and go out of existence. But God doesn't. God just is.

So what does this mean: That the whole world, including the intellectual world, is asking the wrong question. There has seeped into our culture and our assumptions a very bad habit of thinking -- that of using the words "God" and "exist" together. "Does God exist?" is built on the pattern of "Does my car exist?" It looks plausible, but it ain't. It ain't good theological grammar.

So really, we have to break the bad habit of thinking like that. God doesn't exist or not exist, God just is. Just try to break that habit of thought in the intellectual culture and now on the street!

And how is that bad habit broken? Try reciting the mantra: "God is." Get into that habit, that style of thinking. Is this not what brother and sister Muslim do when they recite "Allah o Akbar", God is great? Or when our sister and brother Jew recites the Shema Yisrael -- "Hear O Israel, our God, our God is One"

When we recite the Mantra "God is," then an image of God as a gentle and caring shepherd has new power in us. The "existence or not" monkey is off our backs. We can stand tall and explore the wondrous stories of our faith -- that the eternal God is, always just is and yet, in the story of this Jesus, became so human that it was God who died for us, giving up her life for her sheep --like many a mother or father would. That's what a good shepherd is. That's what Christ is, who is with us and for us every morning and evening of our lives.

You can learn a lot from animals. We may not have met sheep and their shepherds, but in our dogs, our cats and our other pets, we know what genuine trust and dependence they have in us. We are their shepherds. It's uplifting to the spirit to be so needed and loved. That's how God feels about us. That's how God "is" with us.

Amen

St. Francis Lutheran Church
152 Church Street, SF, CA 94114-1111
Phone: (415) 621-2635; Fax: (415) 621-8819
E-mail: StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net
www.st-francis-lutheran.org