

Learning To Walk

A meditation based on Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18

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Two weeks ago I experienced one of those moments — “Poignant Moments for Parents,” we might call them — when one sees the entire span of one’s parenting career at one glimpse. It was at the graduation of my daughter, and seeing her, in cap and gown, walk up to receive her degree evoked a memory of Shauna’s first steps of education. When she was only four, I drove her to Alta Vista Public School every day, and then, at her request, walked with her, hand in hand, across the schoolyard to her Kindergarten classroom. And now, two decades later, I watched her walk up the steps of the graduation stage, without my help, to receive her Bachelor of Theology degree! It was doubly meaningful to me in that the graduation took place at Bethel Mennonite Church, where I took my first steps as a minister!

Any parent can be indulged for these lapses of sentimentality when their own child reaches a moving milestone in her life, but everyone present at this year’s graduation was moved to tears when Marie Moyer, the young woman who was paralysed in an accident last fall, and who has been determined to learn to walk again, struggled up the steps of the graduation stage — without benefit of walker or cane — to receive her degree!

Most of us take walking for granted, but when children take their first steps, it’s a big moment, for them, and for their parents. Walking is one of our first and most important developmental tasks, and its mastery makes for a memorable moment! Our daughter, Rachael, took her first steps near Lake Superior, on one of our cross-country trips to Saskatchewan. And when our son, Donovan, first started walking, he would often call for help, not with walking, but with sitting down again. Taking off was no problem for him, but landing was quite another thing!

Walking With God

The Scriptures often use the word, “walk,” as a metaphor for our journey of faith. The New Testament encourages us to “...walk as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8, RSV), admonishing us: “Look carefully how you walk, not as unwise people but as wise....” (Ephesians 5:15, RSV/NRSV) The Scriptures also tell us to “walk in the way of the Lord” (Judges 2:22); to “walk in (His) statutes” (1 Kings 6:12); to “walk in the way of insight” (Proverbs 9:6); to walk “in the fear of the Lord” (Acts 9:31, RSV) and to “walk in love” (Ephesians 5:2; Romans 14:15, RSV).

We are told to avoid walking “in the way of Cain” (Jude 1:11, RSV), but most of the biblical suggestions about walking are positive. There is the familiar commandment, “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in...the way that I command you, that it may be well with you” (Jeremiah 7:23, RSV). There are also injunctions to walk in integrity (Proverbs 2:7, RSV); to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4); to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7); to walk by the Spirit

(Galatians 5:16, RSV); to walk in the light (1 John 1:7); to walk uprightly (Psalms 84:11); and to walk in the truth (Psalms 86:11).

The Bible often uses the word, “path,” in a similar way, saying, “...show me the path that leads to life” (Psalms 16:11, TEV); “Make me to know thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths” (Psalms 25:4, RSV); “...walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice” (Proverbs 8:20). Indeed, it’s not accidental that in the New Testament the first Christians were referred as people “of the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22), a recognition that our faith is a way of life — a daily walk of faith. It’s not enough to “talk the talk,” we have to “walk the walk”.

Learning To Walk

When children first learn to walk, their parents tend to hover over them, ready to catch them if they falter or fail. More than once I’ve seen a Mom or Dad race frantically to the top of the stairs in the foyer, as their toddler teeters on the brink! It’s a reaction and an impulse that doesn’t go away, even after the child has become quite adept at walking.

A young woman casually mentioned to her parents that she and her husband were thinking of starting a family, and asked, “Do you think I should have a baby?” Her mother answered, “It will change your life”. “I know,” replied her daughter, “No more sleeping in on weekends, no more spontaneous vacations.” “No,” thought the mother, “that is not what I meant; the change will affect you at a much deeper level. You will learn things they don’t teach in childbirth classes. And while the physical wounds of childbearing will heal, becoming a mother will leave you with an emotional wound so raw that you will be forever vulnerable.” (Sent to me by William Peake)

Parenthood changes your entire life, not just the first twenty years! No matter how sophisticated you may be, becoming a parent can easily reduce you to the primitive level of a bear protecting her cubs. No matter how decisive you may be at the office, you will constantly second-guess yourself as a mother or father. No matter how ambitious you may be, you begin to think less and less of accomplishing your own dreams, and more and more about what you can do to help your child accomplish his or her dreams.

I Am The Good Parent / Shepherd

In our gospel reading, the Good Shepherd is contrasted with the hireling, the “hired hand” who “runs away” at the first hint of danger. (John 10:12) There are less obvious contrasts, perhaps implied by their omission. Why did Jesus did not say, “I am the Good Scribe?” or the “Good Pharisee?” or “I am the Good King?” Instead, he chose the image of a shepherd, which, while it has precedent in the Old Testament (e.g., Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34), may have been a questionable choice in New Testament times. A shepherd certainly didn’t have anywhere near the social standing of a Scribe or a Pharisee, and certainly not a King! Yet Jesus chose this metaphor deliberately, just as he chose a “Good Samaritan” in his story of the person who does the generous, hospitable, and good thing. (Luke 10:25-37)

When Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), he could just as well have said, I am the Good Parent, or I am the Good Mother, I am the Good Father, for it seems to me that parents and shepherds have a number of things in common. Both have a responsibility and an inclination to nurture those in their charge. The shepherd, according to the short twenty-third psalm, does a lot to provide for our care, what with

“green pastures,” “still waters,” restoring of soul, guidance, protection, anointing, not to mention over-flowing cups and banquet tables!

Shepherds and parents also see the uniqueness of each one in their charge, knowing the ways each is strong and weak, knowing the needs of each, and doing their best to nurture and nourish each child in the way that he or she needs it. Wise parents know that there is no way that one can love one’s children equally. One child can take roughhousing; another cannot. One child can take joking; another cannot. One child needs lots of cuddling, another is embarrassed by it. Shepherds and parents “know” their flock.

Shepherds and parents provide an abundance of nurture, comfort, care and tenderness, but they must also be tough, for there are times when tough decisions must be taken, and firm discipline provided. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,” says our Gospel (John 10:11) Jesus, our Good Shepherd, says, “...I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:15) This is not the toughness of a God quick to judge and mete out punishment; rather, it is the toughness of One who will go to any length on our behalf! The Shepherd’s toughness, like any parent’s, is evident in the fierce kind of love that is willing to sacrifice all for the sheep. When we stray away from the spiritual and moral foundations that give our lives meaning, we don’t need a God who sighs sweetly and says, “That’s too bad, but it’s okay.” Sometimes we need a God who bellows in our ear and screams, “Fight! Don’t buckle under to this nonsense!”

There is at least another way in which shepherds and parents are alike, and that takes us back to walking. Just as a parent hovers over his or her young child when that child is first learning to walk, needing the wisdom to know when to intervene for the child’s own protection, and when to allow the child the independence necessary for its development, so too God, our Shepherd, hovers over us. “Even though (we) walk through the darkest valley, we fear no evil” (Psalm 23:4), for God has our ultimate protection at heart. Like any wise parent, however, God stands back and lets us walk through those dark valleys, knowing we will be the stronger for it. God does this, wanting us to “grow up in every way into him who is the head” (Ephesians 4:15), Christ Jesus, our Risen Redeemer!

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.