

Psalm 23
John 10:11-18

Nurturing God

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Metropolitan Community Church of Boston
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Good evening. It's great to be here tonight! I want to start out by wishing all the moms in the congregation a Happy Mother's Day. Are there any moms here tonight? Let's give them all a big hand.

I'm really excited -- and a little nervous -- because *my* own mom is here tonight all the way from Virginia. Even though I've been an ordained minister for over two years, this is the first time that she's heard me preach in a congregational setting. So make sure you laugh at all my jokes!

Michael and I have been doing well in New York City. Recently, Michael decided to pursue his passion for acting full-time, and he is currently in an off-off Broadway show. It's called *Tango 'Til They're Sore*, and he actually tangoes in it (which I had no idea he could do in our twelve years together). I am making progress on my Ph.D. program at Union Theological Seminary, and I hope to start writing my dissertation by next spring. It's not as exciting as tangoing, but we all have our gifts.

Anyway, today is the Fourth Sunday in Easter. It's traditionally called Good Shepherd Sunday because all the readings have to do with shepherds and sheep. I don't know why, but I always seem to end up preaching about animals here at MCC Boston. Last spring I preached about horses, last summer I preached about dogs (including Scooby Doo, I think), and tonight I'm preaching about sheep.

Although nowadays the closest that most of us get to sheep is counting them in bed when we can't fall asleep, sheep play an important role in the Bible. They serve as metaphors for us, the people of God. This makes sense in light of the fact that God is the divine shepherd who watches over us. God's leaders are often literally shepherds in the Bible (for example, Jacob or King David), and the word "pastor" is derived from the Latin word for shepherd.

Tonight's gospel focuses upon Jesus as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Unlike the hired hand, who runs away at the first sign of trouble, Jesus the

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Good Shepherd is committed to us, even to the point of giving up his own life in order to save us from danger. Jesus claims us as his own.

This idea of laying down one's life seems particularly appropriate right now, during this time of war and global conflict. No matter what one might think about the moral implications of the recent war in Iraq, I suspect that we are all united in our gratitude for the women and men of our armed forces who have been willing to lay down their life for their country.

As the *Advocate* recently noted in a cover story, many members of our armed services are lesbian and gay, and they cannot even acknowledge that fact or the existence of their partners under the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" rules. I read that the partner of a gay man who is serving overseas is forced to write to his partner as a woman, and he sends his partner pictures of himself standing next to a female friend (posing as the "girlfriend") just so that the military censors won't figure out who he really is.

The sacrifices that LGBT members of the armed forces make is very real. My parents live in Newport News, Virginia, which is near one of the nation's largest military bases. One of their friends has served our country with distinction for many years, including on Air Force One with the President of the United States, and yet he was never able to acknowledge his partner publicly for fear of losing his job.

As an aside, one of Michael's ex-boyfriends happens to be a graduate of West Point, but we won't go there in this sermon. (You can ask him about it at coffee hour if you're really curious.) Anyway, Michael and I have worshiped near my parents' home at MCC Norfolk, and we have personally met many lesbian and gay service members. For me, these people bring a whole new meaning to the idea of commitment and sacrifice in terms of laying down their lives for the well-being of others.

There is another aspect of the Good Shepherd reading that doesn't often get much attention, however, and I'd like to focus a little bit on that tonight. It's the idea of the nurturing God, which seems particularly appropriate on this Mother's Day. Now I recognize that not all of us have had perfect experiences with our mothers, but, as the Good Shepherd, Jesus can be seen as the nurturing God that loves us and takes care of us. Jesus shields us from dangers, gives us the space to grow, and finds us when we have gone astray.

If you think about it, most of our traditional images of God are male-oriented. God is all powerful, all knowing, and ever present. God is the creator of heaven and earth, and the ruler of God's kingdom. God demands worship, repentance and sacrifice, and brings down calamity upon us if we don't act in the right way. Is it no wonder that God is called a "he" and portrayed as a bearded father figure, both in the Bible and in the popular imagination?

For me, the Good Shepherd challenges this masculine conception of God. The divine is not only about power and strength, but it also about commitment, protection and

nurture. The Good Shepherd evokes a God who holds us in God's arms, who comforts us when we are feeling despair, and who sends us into the world, one step at a time. In other words, God relates to us not only as father, but also as mother.

These maternal qualities are emphasized in the beautiful text of Psalm 23. Like a divine mother, God is our shepherd who leads us to green pastures and still waters. God restores our soul and leads us to right paths. We do not fear, even though we walk through the darkest valleys, because God comforts us. What powerful words during this time of great uncertainty and unrest, whether it relates to war, terrorism, disease, economic troubles or personal struggles in our lives.

Not only does God have maternal attributes, but we see them reflected in the lives of the mothers in our community. Lesbian mothers, mothers of gay children, trans woman parents, and even gay men who adopt children are all reflections of the nurturing God. And, as the queer theologian Bob Goss points out, *all* of us are mothers, even if we aren't biological or adoptive parents. As queer people, we give life to our ideas, causes and creative works. We nurture our families and loved ones. And we comfort those who suffer, in body and in spirit.

I'd like to close tonight by mentioning that there is one more interesting connection between the Good Shepherd and our community. As I was reflecting upon this text, I realized that May is Asian American heritage month, and this is the Year of the Sheep in the lunar calendar. The Good Shepherd speaks in a very special way this year to Asian Americans!

The Good Shepherd is a powerful image for me, because as an Asian American, I am painfully aware of the kinds exclusion that we continue to face in the queer community. There is a panel this month in New York City called "Boiling Rice," and it's about lesbian and gay Asian Americans speaking up about our stereotypes and our experiences of being treated as outsiders in the social and political life of the community.

Tonight's gospel promises us that no one will be left behind -- Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will bring the "other sheep" inside the fold. There is one flock, and we are all welcome in God's nurturing home, regardless of who we are, what we look like, or who we love.

As you reflect tonight about the way in which the nurturing God works in your life, I invite you to reflect also on the ways in which *you* are called to be a Good Shepherd to those around you. Who are you called to nurture, comfort and protect? Who will you make sure is never left behind? Who are the "other sheep" for you? God calls us to go out into the world and nurture it into love and freedom. May you have the courage and strength to do so, this Easter season and beyond.

Amen.