

May 2011 Baccalaureate Readings

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He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

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.

-- Psalm 23

“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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

-- John 10:1-10

May 2011 Baccalaureate Address

Good morning!

Well, seniors and graduate students, this day is finally here! It doesn't quite seem real, does it? Yet, here you are, sitting all together in the Chapel, perhaps like you did for Convocation on your very first day of school at Valpo. Only with these awkward robes on, everyone dressed alike. Maybe more than a few butterflies in your stomach. Your family is here. Maybe your girlfriend or boyfriend, or your fiancé. People you love. People who love you. All here to witness a big moment in your life. That moment where everything changes.

For some of you, today has come far too quickly, for others, not nearly fast enough. Regardless of your perception of time or your desire to graduate, this is why you came to Valparaiso University. To get to this day. To be here. Dressed in these robes and wearing these caps and tassels, with friends and family gathered around to celebrate your accomplishments.

I commend you for starting your graduation day here, at Baccalaureate, and in the Chapel of the Resurrection. Maybe you are Lutheran and this Chapel has been a regular part of your Valpo week. You know its every nook and cranny. You studied these windows, the altar, and this amazing *Christus Rex* breaking free of the burden and death of the cross. Maybe you are Christian, but not Lutheran, worshiping or attending events in this place from time to time, but not fully comfortable with its magnificence and the liturgical rituals performed in it. Maybe your faith tradition is not Christian, or you have no faith tradition. Maybe you lost your faith, or your

belief in any organized religion. And maybe you do not believe in the concept of God.

Regardless of your faith, your presence here today is symbolic in several ways. It is symbolic of our shared understanding that at these most important transitional moments in life, it is fitting that we should gather together and take stock of where we have been and where we are headed. It is symbolic of our collective acknowledgement that, in moments like these, we ought to stand before the presence of our Creator, a force much greater than any one of us, a force which we cannot fully know nor comprehend. For Christians, this gathering is symbolic of a return to our baptism and a rededication of our lives and our futures in service to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our presence here today is also symbolic of Valparaiso University's commitment to faith and learning, to be that nexus where Athens and Jerusalem meet, to prepare graduates who will lead and serve in church and society.

We gather here in a day rich in symbolic and metaphorical significance, engaged in a globally recognized rite of passage. We look back to see how far we have come. We look ahead into the wilderness. And now we venture on pathways yet untrodden, to destinations unknown, filled with chance encounters, perils unseen, and opportunities unimagined.

Life as journey.

Students attending baccalaureates and commencements across our nation today will hear someone invoke the ubiquitous metaphor of "life as journey." Cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) consider metaphors far more than a clever turn of phrase. They believe that

metaphors articulate powerful schemata or tacit mental maps that human beings use for sense-making, as we perceive and process the extraordinary amounts of information surrounding us. These mental maps form as a result not only of our individual experience, but also through what we are taught by our parents and other mentors, as they pass along the collective knowledge of human experience.

Lakoff and Johnson describe several human cognitive metaphors which transcend language, culture, and time. Among these are “event structure” metaphors, which use human perceptions of space and movement through space as a link to understanding events. Using event structure metaphors, people think of purposes as destinations. Difficulties are viewed as obstacles to moving forward. And lengthy, goal-oriented activities are described as journeys.

So, as you hear commencement speakers use the metaphor of life as a journey, or when poets describe a path not taken, when decisions become a fork in the road, when people become lost in the wilderness, or when someone encourages you to take the high road on a particular matter, recognize that you are engaged in a complex cognitive and linguistic transaction, drawing on thousands of years of human knowledge and experience. This collective experience, captured in our brains, has led to these succinct, powerful, culturally transcendent schemata, enabling us to make sense out of the apparent chaos of human existence.

The followers of all world religions undertake pilgrimages, or journeys through the wilderness and to a sacred place. One travels through

landscapes filled with danger, loneliness, temptation, on a journey toward a great revelation or insight.

Life as journey, or perhaps, life as pilgrimage. Through the wilderness and toward a great and noble destination. This is an apt metaphor for the Class of 2011 at Valparaiso University.

Yet, I will offer another, infinitely more powerful metaphor that we can use to make sense out of the chaos of existence and lead us safely through the wilderness.

That is Christ as shepherd and we as sheep. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday in the church year, and this morning we heard two texts which develop this metaphor, Psalm 23 and the beginning of Chapter 10 from the Gospel of John.

Of all the metaphors we might choose for a graduation day, perhaps the image of shepherd and sheep would be the least likely to come to mind. After all, for the Class of 2011, today is your day. We have gathered here to celebrate you, Jessica, and you, Elliot, and you, Johanna, and individual accomplishments of each student gathered here this morning. We are proud of your personal journey through Valparaiso University, and your singular achievements.

I will guess that you haven't considered yourself a sheep in the days leading up to today. After all, sheep are considered docile, and overly timid. Certainly not very bright. They easily lose their way, and stick closely together in flocks so that they cannot be easily picked off by predators.

No, sheep is probably not the metaphor of choice for someone who worked tirelessly over 2, 3, or 4 years to earn a degree, lost a lot of sleep, faced stiff competition, and overcame significant obstacles; someone who, through great personal sacrifice, perseverance, and sheer determination, has emerged in a graduation robe, cap, and tassel, ready to stand before the vast assembly later today, waiting for that moment when her or his name is read, and shouts of joy go up from the crowd.

No. Not the right metaphor. Not sheep.

On the other hand, there are some ways in which we might redeem this sheep metaphor. After all, sheep are cute and cuddly. They learn their names easily and will respond when they are called. And while they are a talkative lot, they are also humble and don't take to boasting or lording it over one another. They are honest to a fault. They trust their master implicitly.

Sheep get along marvelously with one another, and like to hang out in crowds. They rally together in crisis, and huddle to protect one another whenever danger appears. Sheep are entrepreneurial, producing wool for the cost of water and an open field, yielding tremendous ROI. They can communicate easily across nations and cultures. No sheep bullies. No sheep terrorists. No sheep wars.

There's a lot to be said for sheep.

And then there's the shepherd. The Good Shepherd. Whom Christians know as Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who guides us through the wilderness, along pathways untrodden, to destinations unknown. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, brings us into verdant pastures and leads us alongside still waters, where we might drink after a long journey. It is this Good Shepherd who takes us down the right paths, who helps us to find our way in times of darkness and despair. It is Jesus who prepares the table for us, who provides nourishment for the journey. We can place our trust in Jesus. He will always be with us.

There have been moments in my life when I was filled with doubt and uncertainty. There have been moments of deep despair, times of great loneliness. There have been days of emptiness, times of grief. And there have been moments of unspeakable horror. In each of these times, when there appeared to be nowhere else to turn, I turned to the Good Shepherd, and in those hours of desperation, I prayed the words of the 23rd Psalm.

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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.

As we reflect upon the symbolic significance of this day as a rite of passage, and our gathering together to begin this day at the foot of the cross, I offer these reflections for your consideration.

That despite all that we may privately consider our individual accomplishments, everything that comes to us is a gift from God. Our keen intellect and insight, our creativity and imagination, our individual drive and determination, our physical strength and stamina. These are all gifts from the Creator, and not solely attributable to us.

That while we come together and bask in the individual and collective accomplishments of the students who will graduate today, and while we celebrate their extraordinary potential to both lead and serve in church and society, we also ought to recognize that they, and we, are uncertain, vulnerable, and in need of the guidance and care of the Good Shepherd.

That while we have charted our course, prepared our resumes, engaged in interviews, and perhaps know the next step we will take, we also ought to recognize that God will surprise us, and that gates will be opened for us, if we but listen for the call of our names.

That we will experience part of life's journey in the wilderness, having lost our way. We will all face times of great darkness, we will all walk in the valley of death. And in these times of fear, loneliness, and isolation, where the world seems dark and the way forward is unclear. It is in these times,

especially, that the Good Shepherd will come to you, with words of comfort, with a steady guiding hand. And it is the Good Shepherd who will bring you into green pastures and provide for you an abundant life.

Soon-to-be-graduates, these are the thoughts I leave you as we share this time together in the chapel. Life can be much more than a journey. It can be a pilgrimage. Consider that everything that you have achieved at this moment of your life came as a gift from God. And for this reason, be humble. Be grateful. Listen for the call of the Good Shepherd. He knows your name. He will keep you safe. Trust in Him. He will open the gate and show you the way. And he will never leave you, nor forsake you, no matter how far into the wilderness you have stumbled, no matter how dark the valley.

Let these be the metaphors of your time on this earth. And may your time be forever blessed.

--Mark A. Heckler

May 15, 2011

Reference

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.