

Sheep May Safely Graze

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

Do you like to watch home improvement shows? Rod and I love watching them. It's a good way to relax and just do something kind of mindless, plus since Rod and Scott remodel and flip houses as a side job, it is a good way to get ideas! One of those shows, Fixer to Fabulous, features the home remodeling team of Dave and Jenny Mars from Bentonville, Arkansas. Recently I learned that Jenny is also a writer and an author, and I have been enjoying reading her stuff. Her writing style reminds me of my own! A few days before the election, she shared the following on the Substack app. It seemed appropriate then, and even more so now. Consider her words.

"I sat with God this morning and handed him my anxiety and my scrolling and my headline-scanning and my listening to the arguments of both sides ... I've tried to suppress it for a few weeks now but the truth is: the upcoming election has me unsettled. I think most of us can feel the tension, the strife, the division in the air. It seems more passionate, more angst-driven than ever before. We are a land divided where friendships and families have been broken over political stances.

(Please keep reading with this disclaimer: this is not a political post. This is not a discussion about which side of the line you stand with. This is a simple reminder that our good God is still in control today and will be on Tuesday and beyond).

So, where did God lead me after our little talk? To the most unexpected place: my GPS tracking app for our livestock guardian dogs.

I felt a nudge to open the app and laughed a bit when I saw Jack's overnight escapades. I took a screenshot of the map and sent it to Dave.

The trail Jack made went. Like this: (squiggly lines all over the property) and he had covered 9.9 miles by the time the night was through.

Then, I read the 34th chapter of Ezekiel. As I read about the abandoned sheep who were left to be attacked by every wild animal (Ezekiel 34:8), I thought back to the spring of 2020 when we lost five sheep due to predator attacks. And, then that summer, we lost my beloved Trixie - the first sheep we took in here at the farm. The one I had bottle-fed. The one who went on walks with us and the dogs along the dirt road in the evenings. The one who would come running at the sound of my voice.

In total, we lost nine sheep to coyotes that year. Dave often slept fretfully on the front porch, listening for the predators in order to protect our herd. We grieved each loss immensely. We triple-secured our fences, ensured the donkey was on alert and locked the sheep up at night. We had hard conversations with our kids. We held them as they cried.

Through those losses, I learned a few things.

We have a very real enemy who seeks to steal, kill, and destroy. Like the pack of coyotes patrolling our pasture, the enemy is vicious and constantly on the prowl. He will find our weakness (like the coyotes will find a weak spot in the fence and they will attack at night when we are asleep) and use it to his advantage.

The enemy thrives on division. Unity is a defense against his attacks. I can do a quick google search and find over 100 verses appealing to believers to seek unity. What I've learned from the attacks in our pasture is that the predators attempt to divide the flock in order to take down individual sheep.

We have a good Shepherd. Our God watches over us and never sleeps or slumbers. In his humanity, Dave had trouble staying awake while watching over the pasture waiting for the predators to return. He woke when he heard the sheep running along the fence and jumped up to figure out what had been attacking. That's when he saw them – a pack of large coyotes. They were startled by his movement and ran off. The sheep were safe yet the threat remained.

Which leads me back to the app and Jack's overnight escapades. It may look like he was just wandering around having a good ole' time. But, the truth of the

matter is he is a working dog. We adopted Jack and Belle in the fall of 2020 and have never had another predator attack our herd since. Jack takes the night shift while Belle works during the day. This is entirely instinctual and a system they devised on their own.

(If you aren't familiar with LGD's: Livestock guardian dogs are bred for the purpose of protecting livestock from predators. They live with the sheep as a full-time member of the flock and can be known to "roam" as a means to patrol and mark their territory and to keep predators away. As a side note to Jenny's story, our family had such a dog, a beautiful snow white (when she wasn't filthy) Great Pyrenees named Izzy. Izzy didn't have any sheep per se, so she decided our family were her sheep. I bet she roamed 9 miles every night too—I know she made a track around our fence line where she patrolled all night long. But she also, as big as she was, could jump any fence, and felt she needed to patrol more than just our yard and so over it she would go! We had to go find her, sometimes many miles away, on several occasions. At the time I thought she was just annoying. Now I know she was just doing her job, faithful 100%. I just didn't realize what she was doing. But back to Jenny's story)

Over the past 24 hours, Jack had "roamed" 9 miles in order to keep his sheep safe. He didn't rest. He never let down his guard. He was always on alert. The sheep slept in safety, Belle at their side (who will awaken at the first threat of danger), while Jack patrolled through the night.

In Ezekiel 34:15, God says, "I myself will tend my sheep and cause them to lie down in peace." Sheep only lie down when they feel safe. If they suspect any hint of danger, they will stay on their feet, ready to bolt. When they lie down and sleep, they are always, only feeling safe.

God tells us, "They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid." (Ezekiel 34:31)

I believe the Holy Spirit led me to my tracking app this morning as a reminder. God never sleeps, God is always on alert. God knows what enemies lurk around us. God

knows what is in store in the morning when we awaken. God alone can provide us the gift of peace. We need not be afraid.

“You are my flock, the sheep of my pasture. You are my people, and I am your God, says the Sovereign Lord.” (Ezekiel 34: 31)

If you are feeling anxious about the results of the election, rest in the fact that at this very moment, I’m watching my sheep graze contentedly in the pasture without fear of the future despite the attacks of the past. They had no idea Jack was out there all night, keeping them safe. Just like we have no idea the ways in which God is working. But we do know this: God is in control today and will be on Tuesday and on Wednesday and on the day after that and on the day after that. We can turn off the news and enjoy God’s peace (and, in turn, be peacemakers to those around us).

So yes, we can take courage in the fact that, like Jack and Belle and Izzy, our Good Shepherd is watching his flock, whether we know it or not. God is still in charge of this world and working towards God’s purposes, and that is a comforting thought.

But let’s be real too. Sometimes some very bad things happen in this world. It’s not all sweetness and light. But do we give up hope, do we stop being a light in the world? No, we do not. In fact, we are called to be shepherds too, the helping hands of the Great Shepherd. We are to tend to the flocks too, to the best of our human ability.

All this makes me think of what the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 6: 10-18.

*¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; ¹¹ put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, ¹² **for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.** ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on the evil day and, having prevailed against everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand, therefore, and belt your waist with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness ¹⁵ and lace up your sandals in preparation for the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the*

shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

And what is the “Whole armor of God?” Not guns. Not weapons of mass destruction. Truth, Righteousness, faith, peace, the word of God, and prayer.

Let us go forth and be like those loyal sheep dogs, defending truth and justice, knowing we are safe in the Father’s fold, and that eventually, God’s will shall be done.

Please Lord Jesus, give us the strength and the courage to face the future, whatever it may hold. Amen