

## I. Introduction

### A. Occasionally I try to understand the world of women.

1. I am not saying I try to understand women. There is a classic joke about that. I am saying something slightly different. I try to understand the dynamics of life from a woman's perspective. Sometimes it's for a sermon or a talk for MOPS. Sometimes its when Sheri and I are having one of those Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus moments where we are explaining our perspective on something, often to the utter amazement of the other. "Were we in the same room? Are we talking about the same thing?"

2. As I have gotten older I am more aware that most of the time I simply do not get it. Do not see it. Do not understand it. Have to be told what just happened.

3. Occasionally I get a glimpse of the life of a woman – especially a Mother – and realize some of the additional challenges, hurdles and heartaches. And usually come away thinking, "Wow, that's hard. Way harder than my life."

### B. Sometimes I think about all of this as I watch the two cats (that reluctantly allow me to live in their house) interact.

1. As I have noted before, Sheri has two cats that she got as kittens. They were feral. A brother and a sister. And it is painful to watch their interaction because he is generally a clueless, blurry-eyed mess. And she is the opposite.

2. He is bigger and faster. But he's dumb as a bag of rocks – and that is insulting to the rocks. He makes all the messes. And he tries to eat her food. And it took him six months to figure out the cat flap. She is always keeping an eye out for him but he only occasionally acknowledges that she exists.

3. And it feels to me like whenever I am commenting about what a idiot he is being that both the female cat and Sheri just look at me like, "remind you of anyone you know? Anyone in this room? Any other males?"

4. I have tried to explain to him that he's not doing me any favors, but he doesn't seem to care. The great thing about being clueless is that you are clueless. It's a low stress position.

C. So let me start by noting that Moms are generally never in that low stress position. You are dialed in to the challenges and needs and heartaches of others. And that is hard. It makes you very vulnerable.

D. As an aside let me also note that, in part because it is hard, it is growing less common.

1. I am finishing up the book for the fall. As I have noted in the past, this book – which is on the future – will not be what you study in small groups next fall. It is for your friends. I am writing a book that I would read if I were not a Christian and that I hope would get me thinking and be open to discussing.

2. The book is called *Future View* and it looks at the five big forces shaping our world right now and considers how they will play out in the next few decades. The sermon series – which will be called Future You – will be based out of the first chapters of Daniel and will look at how Daniel and his friends lived in Babylon. It explores themes like faith, courage, community, wisdom – qualities that will serve us well no matter what the future holds.

3. I think there is a lot of change coming our way – some good and some bad. And in the book I try to point to what appears to be in the pipeline.

4. It's the bad that got me thinking about all of this. And I'm hardly alone. Jim Collins, the management guru, the author of *Good to Great*, *Built to Last*, et. al.) is now studying what separates "those who do well from those who do not when the world spins completely out of control," because he believes that:

a) There will be no New Normal. We are now dealing with a world that is going to be ferocious. The volatilities, the turbulence, the uncertainties of the world will probably define the second half of my life.<sup>1</sup>

5. One of the things that has become clearer to me in researching this book is that we do not have as many Moms as we used to.

a) The population of the planet keeps climbing, but that is because we are living longer.

b) In 1820 the average global life expectancy was 29. It is now 70, and higher in the US.

c) So we have more and more people, but fewer and fewer children – and part of that is because it's hard to be a Mom.

d) It's a hard job.

E. So the question this morning is: what might God say to Moms – what might God say to all of us at this moment – but in particular to Moms.

II. I am aware that:

A. There is already a lot of advice out there, from women's magazines and TV shows. There is already lots of coaching tips out there from a stereotypical, fairy-tale version of what being a Mom is supposed to look like. There is encouragement out there in Hallmark cards. There is advice out there from the vantage point of a battle between men and women.

B. I am aware that many women are tired. Sheri tells me that most women are overwhelmed and exhausted and that many suffer from low self-esteem, are often depressed and lonely, and that more than a few are self-medicating.

C. I am aware that life is hard. The Faith Story we watched today of a Mom with two young children who is suddenly without a husband or father reflects the all too common real challenges of real life in a broken world.

III. What would God say to those of you in a tough spot? What would God say to those of you who are simply tired because of the never-ending cadence of life as a Mom?

A. A younger version of me would likely turn to Proverbs 31. If you not familiar with that passage you can read it later. I promised never to use it for a Mother's Day sermon so I am not going there now. It describes Martha Stewart without the insider trading charges. And that is not a helpful message on Mother's Day.

B. I am aware that I often give that kind of advice. I do not direct it at moms in particular, but with some frequency I do say to everyone: get in the game. Love more, pray more, give more, serve more. That is the way forward. That is a message I stand by. But on it's own it's very unhelpful.

C. I want to highlight a different message today. I want to say to you – to everyone, but I am particularly focused on Mom's today – God is for you.

1. God loves you. God delights in you – not because you are perfect – are on top of everything. The kids are perfect, your work is done, the house is clean and you are in great shape. Not because you've lost all the baby weight.

D. What I want you to hear today is that God loves you period. In the same way that you love a newborn – not because they are a highly functioning, contributing member of the family, but because you love them. In that same way, God loves you.

E. In Zephaniah we are told that God sings over us.

1. Zeph. 3:17 reads:
    - a) The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.
    - b) That is a vision that seems to come right out of the nursery.
  2. In other passages we are told that God's love for us is like the love of a mother:
    - a) In Isaiah 49 we are told that God can no more forget us than a mother can forget her nursing child.
    - b) In Isaiah 66 we are told that He will comfort us like a mother comforts a child
    - c) In Hosea 13 we are told that God is like a mother bear protecting her cubs.
- F. There are multiple places where God's love is compared to the love or care of a mother.

IV. If you have your Bibles, turn to Psalm 23

- A. This is a very familiar passage. Perhaps other than The Lord's Prayer this is the most familiar passage in the entire Bible.
- B. While you are finding it let me reiterate that my comments today are not directed at those of you who feel like you have earned a special day, but are directed in particular at those of you who think you have not.
1. Whose kids are not perfect
  2. Whose children did not get into Harvard
  3. Whose children did not get into college
  4. Whose children may not make it through high school
  5. Whose children will not call today because you are not on speaking terms with them right now.
- C. Or you are not a Mom. That was the plan but it hasn't worked out for whatever reason.
- D. I want to say something to those of you who are broken:
1. By your kids, by the fact that you do not have kids
  2. By divorce, by cancer, by SIDs, by addictions or unemployment

3. By whatever.

E. Men and women, young and old, I want to give you a glimpse of God's heart for you.

**V. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,**

A. There is a lot here.

1. There are a number of popular treatments of this passage – I know of a half dozen books written by shepherds on this Psalm. In recent years the scholarship around it has exploded. And all of that is superfluous to the profound insights of the Psalm itself, which was written by David.

B. The image of God as a shepherd is found throughout Scripture. There is a lot about sheep: sheep as sacrifices, sheep tied to Passover, Jesus as the Lamb of God; parables about lost sheep. And then we have stories and parables involving shepherds.

A. All of these are written in a setting where people understood sheep.

1. Knows that sheep are among the most helpless creatures God made. They have no defenses – they can't bite you with their fangs or claw you with talons or knock you over with their antlers. They cannot run away, fly away or swim away. They are not very smart – left on their own.

2. It's worth pondering that this is the animal God says we remind him of.

3. Sometimes people ask, "If you were an animal, what animal would you be?" And people always say something like: an eagle or a leopard or something fast and sleek and cool and powerful. Sorry. God already answered that question. We are all like sheep who have gone astray.

C. When I was in Israel the first time, I went out to see the shepherds.

1. I asked my host if I could go for a run. It was about 4 in the afternoon. I was staying in student housing at Bethlehem Bible College and he had been driving me all over the country, but he was going home and I had the evening to myself. And I asked him if I could go for a run. I wanted to run to Jerusalem – just a couple miles away. I wanted to do this for two reasons: I wanted to go through one of the check points to see what that was like; and I also wanted to see the shepherds I had seen when we were driving.

2. So, I ask, "Would it be safe for me to go for a run? And he said, "I don't know. What does your doctor say?"

3. “No, no, no, I run all the time. I am asking, if it would be safe to run here, on the streets. I want to leave this area and run to Jerusalem. Will I be safe running on the roads?”
  4. No. There are cars on the roads.
  5. That’s not what I mean. I will avoid the cars. I’m asking if I am safe to be out by myself.
  6. Oh, you’re from Chicago. You are worried about getting shot. You are safe here. This is not Chicago. It’s the West Bank. It’s much safer here.
- D. So I ran to Jerusalem. It’s 2 miles maybe, perhaps less. But along the road are fields and in the fields are shepherds tending to their flocks.
1. Most of them seem to spend most of their time talking on their cell phones, but they are never far away from the flock. Guiding them.
  2. And their sheep know their voice and most will not wander far.
- E. And the shepherds protect them.
1. And what he or she is looking for is a nice place where the sheep can eat their fill and drink and then sit down and relax and chew their cud. Sheep are like cows in that they eat grass, it goes into one stomach to predigest. Then later on they chew it more and it goes into a different stomach.
- F. It is rare for a sheep to lie in a green pasture. Usually they are eating there. They have to be well cared for to be lying in a green pasture.
- G. And because they are scared of everything, even running water, they need still water to drink. They could die of thirst two feet from a creek if the water is moving to quickly they will not drink it.
- H. So this opening line is a picture of sheep that is well cared for.

**VI. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters. He leads me beside quiet waters. V3: He refreshes my soul.**

- A. Do not limit the word *soul* to mean the non-physical self, as if God cares for only part of us. “Soul” is often used in the Old Testament to mean “life” or the whole person. David celebrates that God restores his life in all of its facets.
- B. God is a fixer and a healer. He does not replace broken people, He redeems them. We do not get fixed, when we turn to God we get renewed and restored.

C. You might remember that in Luke 15 Jesus tells a story in which the Good Shepherd – God – leaves the ninety-nine sheep to recover the one that is lost. And when he is reunited with the flock, the Lord rejoices.

D. Imagine that—as happy as you are to be restored, God rejoices even more, but not for the reason we might imagine.

1. When we restore a broken car we're happy because it's useful again. Many of us have been conditioned to think this way about God.

2. God wants us to be useful again. He wants to be able to use us.

E. This is not only a flawed view of our value, it is an unflattering view of God. Do you really think God needs you to accomplish anything?

F. Back in Luke 15 Jesus tells us three stories: the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son. The point of these stories is not about their restoration so they can be useful. It's about their being found. It's a restoration of presence. The return of each lost item led to a celebration because the relationships between shepherd and sheep, woman and coin, father and son, are restored. Similarly, God rejoices at the restoration of our life not so he may use us, but because he longs to be with us. He delights in being our Shepherd, as we delight in being his sheep.

G. Again, I would direct you to the language of God being like a mother who delights in her newborn.

**VII. V3 says, He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.**

A. Why does the Lord make us lie down in green pastures, lead us beside still waters, and restore our soul? Psalm 23 says he does these things “for his name's sake.” Think about this. It doesn't say that He does it for us.

B. Mike, I thought you were saying that He does these things because He loves us. Doing it for his name's sake sounds self-serving rather than self-sacrificing.

C. Don't miss the big idea here. What we are being told is that God's reputation, the glory of his name, is linked to our wellbeing. David is emphasizing the unbreakable bond between a shepherd and the sheep.

D. He is saying that God links His reputation with our well being.

E. God can no more neglect his people than he can neglect himself.

**VIII. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death – or “darkest valley.”**

A. This is one of those places attracting lots of attention from scholars. The King James translated it Shadow of Death – which is powerful prose.

B. Current thinking is that while it could include death it doesn't have to. It could be a dark valley. (Insert phrases from The King James Version)

1. As shepherds try to move their sheep above the tree line for some of the greatest places to graze, they have to force them through valleys that are dark that often the sheep do not want to go into.

C. These are not the destination but they are things we need to get through from time to time to get to where we want to be. We often cannot become who we really want to become without going through the valleys.

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

A. The rod was a defensive weapon. The staff if a hook to help with the sheep

**X. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.**

A. You prepare a meal for me, which in that time was a big deal. No fast food.

**XI. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

XII. There is a lot here. If you want to reflect on this I think the easiest book to read is still Philip Keller's, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*

A. He was a shepherd in Africa, New Zealand and the United States and some of the purists think his insights are not as good as they would be if he had been a shepherd in the Middle East.

1. And that makes sense. New Zealand looks like this – picture one. And Israel looks like this – picture two

2. No doubt being a shepherd differs from one to the other

XIII. But my point today – to Moms and the rest of us – is, our value to God doesn't come from our performance. We are not earning it. He doesn't love you because you are the best Mom. He loves us like a Mother loves her new born baby. Learn to find rest in your father's arms.

A. When I officiate at a wedding, I do my best to make it clear to the couple what they are doing.

B. What they are signing up for is to love with the kind of love God has for us – which has nothing to do with emotions and everything to do with commitment. It has nothing to do with conditional clauses and everything to do with grace. It is not an subject elicited love—it is not I love you because you are loveable—but it is an object generated love—It is “I love you,” period. I am committed to you. I want what is best for you. Irrespective of my needs and wants and emotions I love you.

XIV. I am going to turn this over to the campus pastors at this point and invite them to pray a prayer of blessing over everyone, but especially the Moms.

A. Lord we thank You for your love for us as a Good Shepherd.

1. For caring for us in spite of who we are, in spite of our failures and mistakes, angers, lusts, fears, pride, greed and envy.

2. Help us learn to trust you and rest in your goodness, like a sheep that lays down in green pastures besides still waters.

B. Father, we pause to confess that we have not appreciated all that you have done for us nor have we appreciated all that our Moms have done for us. Thank you for them. Imperfect as they are. Thank you for our Moms. Would you bless them. Would you help them – all of us really, but especially Moms – understand your love for them and their value.

C. Give them rest and comfort today. Help them to find some green pastures and still waters. Help them to know that you are their Good Shepherd.

D. We ask that You would fill their hearts with grace and love and encouragement – that you would give them strength, patience, wisdom and joy as they sense your great love for them.

E. Thank You for the wisdom and guidance we have received from our own mothers and for many selfless actions that they so often take on behalf of their children, and which so often goes unnoticed, unacknowledged and un-thanked.

F. Draw close to all mothers we pray and fill each one with, guide and direct them as they carry out the roles and responsibilities of motherhood and draw them into close loving fellowship with their families and with You – this we ask in Jesus name,

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<sup>1</sup>Bob Buford, “Active Energy,” August 2010. I am citing Collins’ comments with Buford at a private dinner, as reported in Buford’s blog.