Malcolm Clemens Young Job 19:21-27a

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2C23 Psalm 23

Memorial Service 3:00 p.m. Rev. 7:9-17

Wednesday 25 May 2022 John 14:1-6

**David Reineman Forbes (29 April 1926 – 26 April 2022)**

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (Jn. 14).

My strongest recollection of that September afternoon always includes the clean smell of heat, that Northern California smell of chapparel, something like rosemary and dust, with a touch of campfire smoke. As a newly ordained 27 year old, at my first Bishop’s Ranch clergy retreat, David Forbes in cut-off jeans, was the first person to greet me. He already knew my name and that I had graduated from the University of California. He welcomed me at the very beginning of my life’s profession. In those days no one paid much attention to me but he knew me by name.

David always loved beginnings. It’s part of what made him such a compelling character. His enthusiasm for the future always made he seem young. He was part of the beginning of this Cathedral. When he arrived to serve here as a deacon, there was only one priest here and the building was only half finished. It had one bell tower disconnected from the rest of the nave which was shut off from the elements by a kind of tin roof material descending 100 feet from the ceiling.

Even more important in those days the Cathedral was unknown to people in the city. He used to like telling the story of a cab driver, who told him, “That’s a Presbyterian church and they’ll never finish it.”

David had a hand in bringing into being pretty much everything you see around you. He was involved in the design of this high altar and its placement here in the transept crossing. We still wear vestments that he designed. His work on how worship is conducted here influences churches around the world. He chose the words carved into the lectern. They say, “in the beginning” and are written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

As you have heard Burns describe he was a driving factor in creating the Cathedral School for Boys (1961), St. Paul’s School in Oakland (1975) and the National Association of Episcopal Schools.[[1]](#endnote-1) He accomplished so much more than we can outline today. The New York Times columnist David Brooks writes about what he calls “resume virtues” and “eulogy virtues.”[[2]](#endnote-2) David Forbes had more than enough of both, but I’m going to especially miss the encylopedic quality of his knowledge about things that deeply matter to me.

On David’s last visit to San Francisco he took me on a wild drive around the city (he was almost 96 years old). He showed me the houses he lived in, took me down Lake Street. We would stop at an ancient brick apartment building in the Richmond District and he would talk about being a kid and watching as it was being constructed. And then he pulled over looked me in the eye and told me that I was going to be the preacher at his funeral.

The purpose of the long drive and our lunch together was for him to help me with what I am going to say to you today. David has left us with a kind of puzzle, a mystery that we are all going to solve together. David chose everything about this service. The readings, the hymns, the ritual of the meal we will soon share. These all include a message addressed individually to each of us. They articulate the answer to a simple question: who will God be for you? What difference will God make in your life and through your actions, in the world?

I’m only going to make three short points. First, we live in a world that is alienated and alienating. We often feel cut off from God. We do not experience things as they actually are. Instead the world’s social construction of reality often makes it difficult for us to perceive the light of God which has shined since the first day of creation. As it says in the Prologue to John, “In the beginning was the word… The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn. 1). David was deeply acquainted with this darkness and profoundly concerned about it. Hatred, conflict, racism, mental illness, prejudice against gay people, poverty, the desecration of the planet deeply troubled him. He would be in despair today over the school shootings in Texas.

My second point has to do with the image David gives us of the Good Shepherd. In the face of this darkness we have a choice. We can decide who will be our master. I know so many successful, wealthy, brilliant people who are at the same time deeply miserable. They are unhappy because their lives are held in the grips of a relentless and heartless master. They are slaves to the whims of their ego. In short we have to choose between our ego and the Good Shepherd. So what is a good shepherd?

In high school I learned something about sheep from my my friends in 4H Club. Psalm 23 says, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures…” Sheep will only lie down if four conditions are met. The sheep needs to be free from fear, free of parasites, free of hunger and at peace with the other sheep.[[3]](#endnote-3) The Good Shepherd is the one who makes this freedom possible. For me, having Jesus as my Good Shepherd makes me more free from fear, more at peace with the people in my life.

My last point is that this image of the Good Shepherd comes from Jesus’ last meal with his friends. At that meal Jesus tells his friends that he gives them a new commandment, that they love one another. The New Testament scholar Herman Waetjen emphasizes that this love (agape) is not just a personal emotion. Instead, he calls it “the service that liberates.” The response to this love should not be a mystical devotion to Jesus but to practically love one another.

For this reason David devoted his life to the liberation of all people. In his nineties he was serving on the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Taskforce at a crucial time for the Cathedral School. His comments in trustee meetings were constantly about lifting up students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Who will God be for you, and what difference will that make? The congregation here at Grace Cathedral is used to me giving homework in sermons. I’ve never given homework at a funeral before, but here’s what I have to offer. Take the bulletin home. And spend some time really thinking about the words of the last hymn (665).

It goes like this: “All my hope on God is founded; who doth still my trust renew / me through change and chance he guideth / only good and only true. / God unknown, you alone, call my heart to be thine own.”

I will always love David. He was such a good listener. He was constantly looking after other people. He made us feel valued, like we mattered. He was humble. He lived in a state of gratitude. He had a kind of inner light. I miss him very much and think of him nearly every day. I’ve been having a tough time lately and I could use his help.

No one knows what happens after you die. But for the past few months as David has been saying goodbye to his friends, he has been saying, “See you on the other side.” David has been faithful. He has been a good shepherd to us.

I don’t know what heaven is but I imagine it to be like the countryside uphill from the Russian River as it winds through Healdsburg. As we approach the Ranch House there, ready for our new beginning, I can imagine David welcoming us and greeting each of us by name.

1. David appears in the Cathedral School for Boys mural. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. W. Philip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007) 41-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)