

GENERAL PRESBYTER'S REMARKS DECEMBER 6, 2005

Psalm 23:4 reminds us of God's provident care: "your rod and your staff, they comfort me." The Shepherd's Psalm is one of the most quoted passages of scripture, largely because it is a source of great comfort to all who hear it. We all grow up with mental images of the Good Shepherd, who stoops to pick up the one lost lamb, carrying it tenderly over his shoulders, restoring the lost lamb to the safety and security of the flock.

Webster's dictionary has at least six distinct definitions of the word "staff." One of the most recognizable is: "a long stick carried in the hand for support while walking; a club or a cudgel." The familiar part of that definition is the first piece - the long stick deftly used by the shepherd to gather and protect the flock.

The surprising part is the second piece - a club or cudgel. We picture in our minds the long slender shepherd's crook, bent at one end to facilitate lifting a fallen lamb out of a hole. We might even picture it slicing through the air to ward off threatening animals or to discipline a wayward member of the flock. But not a club, and certainly not a cudgel!

Charles Swindoll helps us to distinguish between the rod and the staff. The staff, as many of us imagine, was that long, bent crook, useful in beating down long grass (to drive out snakes), holding back branches along narrow paths, and rescuing sheep from thickets and crevices.

The rod, on the other hand, was typically a hardwood club about two feet long. The head of the rod was usually round and somewhat larger, often whittled from the knot of a tree. Commonly, sharp pieces of metal were pounded into the head to lend a more lethal sting. It was a symbol of the shepherd's power. Used correctly, it offered protection from the dangers of the world.

This is certainly not the tool of the Good Shepherd we learned about in Sunday School. And yet, as adults, we see the logic and the need for both in the shepherd's quiver. There are times the gentle use of the staff is all that is needed. But there are times, late at night alone in the woods, that a rod comes in handy!

Our fascinating lesson in linguistics needs to move on. For Webster reminds us of another definition of staff: "the personnel who assist a director in carrying out an assigned task." Before we go too far in asking which in the presbytery's employ are the staff and which are the rods, let me suggest that they are all staff. As we come close to the end of another year, let me take time to thank each of the gentle spirits who serve our presbytery so well (listed alphabetically, to keep me out of trouble): Dana Bailey (our Stated Clerk), Marcus Barber (our Associate General Presbyter), Julie Burton (our Director of Congregational Resources), Teresa Herleth (our Administrative Assistant), and Jane Probey (our Financial Secretary). Each is skilled beyond measure and each comes to their task as a ministry and a calling, rather than a job or a drudgery. They are essential parts of our presbytery's mission, even though they are often not seen in proportion to all that they do. Seldom have I found such a leadership team willing to work together to exercise the authority of the shepherd without having to resort to the power of the rod. They are helpers and servants, a joy and a blessing. We are fortunate to have them all.

As we move toward a new year, let us remember a bit of Pastor Swindoll's lesson. Sheep that we are, we take comfort in knowing that we may count on the protection of our Shepherd. His rod and his staff, they comfort us. They protect us from those who would do us harm. And they discipline us when we are the ones who stray from the path.

More than that, most of us here are part of the church's "staff" in one way or another, whether called, paid, or volunteer. Let us remember our duty to protect and lift up the flock entrusted to our care. Let us deal gently and pastorally with those who have slipped or wandered. And, if we need a rod, let our primary weapon be the Word of God. For then the chastisement we level at one another will be immediately surrounded also by the grace of a loving God, who corrects in order to restore. May that be our goal each time we pick up the rod, to correct in order to restore.

And may we trust that those others with us in service, the "staff" of which we are all a part, are each called and gifted by God. Together may we bring forth both the discipline needed to keep the flock moving forward and the loving care to protect them from all harm. Together may we learn anew each day what it means to serve our Lord with joyful hearts.

As we enter a new year, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.