

Fourth Sunday of Easter April 25, 2021

Psalm 23

We've all experienced it in some way- a hired hand, a worker, an employee, a volunteer who is... shall we say... less than engaged. Who is there for the paycheck, or the volunteers hours, who when presented with a challenge take actions that require minimum effort or just give up entirely. Why? They have no investment beyond their jobs.

These are the hired hands Jesus talks about. These are the ones who do not own the sheep and so when danger approaches (the wolf), they run away. Because the sheep are not theirs, they have no investment of self in them.

Jesus says, I am the Good Shepherd. When danger comes, I lay down my very life for the sheep. I know these sheep who are mine. Know them intimately, personally. And they know me- they've experienced my loving care for them before.

Jesus, God's self-expression to us, is our Good Shepherd. We recognize this truth because followers of the One True God have experienced the love and care of this shepherd throughout time. You see this image of God as the Good Shepherd throughout scripture, but perhaps nowhere as well-known as Psalm 23.

"The Lord is my shepherd" it is the Lord who is our Shepherd- no one else. Nothing else. This is first commandment stuff here- You shall have no other gods before me. As Martin Luther says we are to fear, love and trust God alone. How freeing this is! To say to all those who would take on the

mantle of Shepherd. Who would claim priority for caring for us, providing for us, protecting us... “No! The Lord is our Shepherd, you aren’t!” It is God alone who we stand in awe of, who we love with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Who loves us enough to send Jesus into the world not to condemn us, but save us. The Lord is our shepherd; not some politician, or celebrity. Not a political party, or religious leader.

Because the Lord is my shepherd, “I shall not be in want.” God provides enough- for everyone, for their physical needs. “I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” Martin Luther explains that this First Article of the Creed reminds us that “God has created me together with all that exists, and God daily and abundantly provides... shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse, all property...along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life.” We pray in the Lord’s Prayer “Give us this day our daily bread.” Again, Luther reminds us that “God gives daily bread without prayer even to all evil people...” and that “Daily bread is everything included in the necessities and nourishment of our bodies”. We see this promise fulfilled again and again in scripture- In the wilderness God provides the Israelites daily bread- manna and quail- enough for all to eat and be filled. Jesus feeds the 5,000 and all eat, and were filled, and there are leftovers!

There is abundance in this world God has created and made fertile so that all can have enough. So why are some in want? Why do some not have enough for the “necessities and nourishment of their bodies”? It is the distribution system that runs through us where the problem lies. We don’t share so everyone has enough. And that lack of sharing is a matter of

faith. Faith trusting God above all other things. Faith is the trust that God provides enough- that what we are given belongs to God first and that we are just stewards of it for a time. Faith is living with an open and generous hand knowing that sometimes we are the means by which God provides enough for someone else. And that when we are in want- God will provide.

The same Good Shepherd and Lord who provides abundantly cares not just for the body (I shall not be in want) but the soul. The Lord makes a place to lie down (green pastures) beside waters that are still- not the churning, chaos of the sea but the gentle watering of a brook. Places that are life giving. Why does God provide these places- to restore our souls. To revive them from sickness leading to death.

The Good Shepherd who provides all we need for our bodies, who revives our souls, leads us in righteous paths. Paths that will lead to food and water, to restoration and resurrection. Paths that glorify the name and reputation of God through loving service to others. We bear the very name of the risen Christ. We are Christ-ians. And the paths we follow, the life we lead, the words we speak, the actions we take either reflect well on who God is or dishonor God. If we but follow the Good Shepherd, the path will be one of righteousness. Honoring who God is.

Even when we walk through the valley of death- where threats lie all around us. God is with us. We have walked that valley these past 14 months in a way unknown by many of us. We walk through this valley whenever death touches us or comes near. When threats to our body and soul loom over us. When we walk this valley- God in Jesus Christ goes

with us. Because he has been down this road before and back again. The shepherd protects us with the rod and guides us with the staff. The threat is still there. But the Lord's presence comforts. Because we walk these paths for the name of our Lord. We go into the dark places because life takes us there and because life takes other people there. And we are the church, the Body of Christ, and so we go there too. When people are walking through the dark valley- of depression, loneliness, cancer and other diseases, death- expected and sudden. We walk with people- a visible sign of the reality of God's presence with them. We guard them with the rod- advocating for them, sheltering them, protecting them. We guide them with the staff- pointing the way to help, to the way out, to God's constant care and mercy.

The Good Shepherd prepares a table for me in the presence of my enemies. When those who would rejoice at your downfall are in front of you- God chooses you. This is symbolized by the setting of a table- this had implications for hospitality in that day. To feed someone at your table meant you took responsibility for them and their welfare while they were in your house. Anointing was also a choosing. One normally reserved for kings and prophets. You are chosen by an anointing as well. At baptism, with oil. A visible sign of the cross of Christ by which you are saved is traced on your forehead.

Our cup runs over with abundance- of love, of grace, of nourishment of body and soul. In this way God thumbs God's nose at your enemies and says to them you have to come through me first. We, the church, do the same- for the oppressed, the poor, the neglected, the ones with no voice.

We set a table for them- both literally at communion and through our sharing ministries that feed and figuratively, accepting responsibility for their protection. In doing so we recognize the image of God that resides in them. That is there regardless of whether they act as if they bear that image or not. That is there even if I might be tempted to label them as thug, brute, racist, unworthy.

The Good Shepherd, filled with steadfast love and mercy, is the one who will chase you down all those other paths that you follow. The unrighteous paths. This Good Shepherd will go ahead of you and meet you even when you try and flee, will find you whenever you go astray- in whatever height or depth you find yourself. This is what the Good Shepherd does. Because Jesus is invested in you, knows you, loves you. Created in the image of God, made part of the Body through baptism.

And because of the lovingkindness and mercy of this God, by the anointing and claiming of God in Jesus Christ- not because of anything we have done- we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And so even when we are at death's door, the Shepherd will be there. "In my Father's house there are many rooms." "I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am you may be also."

Therefore, we the church, we the people of God, are not a community of death, but a community of life. We are not a community of despair, but of hope. We are the people of the resurrection. We proclaim a message of grace and hope to a world that seems to think that death has the final word.

We are a hospital for sinners, not a club for saints. We are a place where the broken, the hungry, those without hope can come and be made whole, can eat their fill. A place where we proclaim the Good Shepherd, embody that lovingkindness that says all can be forgiven and renewed, can come and be inspired. We are a place where those who are afraid to speak- can become witnesses to the life-giving Jesus. We are a place where the imperfect come and find their perfection in Christ. For there is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved.

This is what it means to say “the Lord is my shepherd:” It is to trust in God for everything in life, to give to others freely and joyfully, it is to live in the peace of Christ, it is to trust God, even when enemies surround us, and to stand with others in the same situation. It is to trust God in life and death, to be with those in the valley. It is to proclaim a word of hope, always.

We know love by this, that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love reside in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Friends in Christ, forgiven, claimed and loved by God. Let us love in words and speech- yes-- but also in truth and action.

For we are sheep of the Good Shepherd. Claimed in love. As we are fed this day in both body and soul, let us then go and follow our Shepherd on righteous paths to honor his name we bear and for the sake of the world he so loves.