

## **Fourth Sunday of Easter April 21 2024**

**Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18**

Over the next 3 weeks we have three images from John describing who Jesus is. What his life and ministry, death and resurrection mean for us. Three ways the church- over time- found to describe Jesus and his significance for us.

Jesus says in our text, "I am the good shepherd."

This would have been an image that would mean something in that day. Where keeping sheep would have been common. Folks would know about shepherds, sheep, and hired hands. Jesus says he is more than the hired hand, whose loyalty to the flock only extends so far. Rather, he says, he is like a good shepherd.

Which means, first, that Jesus knows us (and we know him). Here the word used for know implies firsthand experience. Like how you know a scrape hurts, or a how a warm blanket on a cold day soothes. You have experienced those things.

Jesus knows us because he is one of us. He knows the pains of growing up... of trying to eat mom and dad out of house and home because he's hungry all the time. He knows the pain of a stubbed toe, the joy of a cool drink on a hot day. He knows our lives because he has lived it.

And we know him. Because people have told us the story. His story. Of the child born to humble parents, but with great signs and portents. Of growing up with a normal life in Galilee- active in their faith. Of his entry into ministry and finding success. Of his teachings that rocked the tradition of his day. We know him

because of the witness that this human being was more than just that. That in him, God was present with us.

We know Jesus because he comes to us. In the witness of scripture- the Gospels- but also in those around us who tell us and have told us the story. Stories of how they have known Jesus in their own lives. And he comes to us in very real ways like he did with Paul on the road to Damascus.

I have read the stories of drug users who have had a real experience of Jesus coming to them at their lowest and saying, "I love you, it doesn't have to be like this." I have heard others tell the story of a stranger who came to them in their moment of need and then disappeared into obscurity- one who they swear was Jesus walking with them. Of my own mother- looking for Jesus in the trees on the other side of the lake at Luther Ridge in North Carolina. And experiencing him standing right next to her.

We know Jesus' voice. His voice is the one that tells us to stop and help that student who looks lost, that person by the side of the road, that one who is crying. His voice is the one that makes us wonder before we get angry at someone. His voice is the one that tells us to love others.

Jesus knows us. The real us. The imperfect, sinful, willful, selfish human being that resides in all of us. And he loves us. Loves us enough to look beyond all of that and admire our unique gifts and talents. "My what a wonderful gift for writing you have!" "Oh, how creative a solution that was."

Jesus is the good shepherd, because we are not just some anonymous flock he was hired to keep, but because he knows us and we know him. A mutual knowing. A relationship.

Jesus is the good shepherd because he will die for us. Will lay down his life, so that we might be free. Show us that life doesn't have to be this way. As Peter says in Acts, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." It is in his name alone that true healing comes. Because he will give everything so that we might live.

Like the shepherd in Psalm 23, Jesus walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death- because he has been there and back again. Because his love for us is not just in words, but in action. Something I keep in mind. Pastors are required to take a three-month course of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and one of my colleagues during that time looked me in the eye and asked, "How will your people know that you love them." She had no doubt that I did (and I do), but she was in her 1 John mode. You can love in word, but fat lot of good that does. You have to also act on that love. Jesus does this. He loves in deed as well as word.

Jesus is the good shepherd because he leads us in paths of righteousness.

Through green pastures. In Palestine, there are no lush and verdant fields like many of us imagine. Instead, the west wind blows its humidity against the dusky hillsides where it condenses on the cool rocks at night. That little bit of moisture (along with the meager 23 inches of rain Jerusalem gets each year) is just enough to grow little sprigs of grass. These are the green pastures the Bible talks about.

If you look carefully, you'll see dirt paths crossing the hillsides. These paths are where the shepherd allows his or her sheep to graze on those little sprigs, and they are spaced just far enough apart so the sheep can reach both sides to get a mouthful of grassy goodness. It's not a lot of grass. Just little sprigs. But it's enough to take a bite then walk a little farther and take another bite. The shepherd leads the sheep through the sprigs until each sheep has had a chance to eat. It's not a lot of grass sometimes, but it's enough for today's meal.

Jesus leads us to the places where we can get enough for each day (sound familiar). We also know his voice because that voice calls us to love, grace, compassion, mercy. When we hear that, calls to that- that is the voice of Jesus.

This is Jesus the good shepherd- who keeps us safe, guides us to places that will feed us, who knows us intimately, who will (and has) died to keep us safe.

And- here is the amazing thing- not only are we to follow the good shepherd. We are to be good shepherds for all those whom we meet.

We are to bathe in the love of God come to us in Jesus our Good Shepherd, and we are to go share that love by being good shepherd for others.

To know them and be known. To be in community with them. To be curious about them before anything else. To experience other human beings. Trust me, as an introvert by nature, it is a scary and wondrous thing to practice.

Yet, it is when we do this. When we see someone who is physically hungry and we feed them. When they are without shelter and we give them shelter. When

we do this, we offer them not only life, but hope. The possibility that life doesn't have to be this way. That they do have worth and value.

When we see someone who is spiritually hungry, we lead them bit by bit along the path of righteousness. When we see them nibble on the green grass of the Word of God. When we see them blossom into the fullness of who God has called and equipped them to be. There is no joy better than that.

And there are so many witnesses that this is just what the early church did. From Peter and John healing the man who was crippled, to the witness of Lydia (Dorcas) who made clothes for the widows and orphans, to the way in which things were shared so that none had need. This flock of Jesus provided for the needs of those they met- physical as well as spiritual. They showed their love.

The Lord is our Good Shepherd, when we follow him we shall never be in want. He leads us down paths of right relationship with God and one another. He leads us beside waters still and deep. Ones that both bring and illustrate what the shalom of God in Jesus means. When we rest in him, our very souls our-selves are restored. Into the image of God we have been created to be.

The Lord is our Good Shepherd. His rod and staff comfort and guide us wherever we go, from the darkest valley of our lives to the bright sunshine of the mountain top. Even when we are in the very presence of those who would do us harm, Jesus prepares a table overflowing with abundance. And invites them to join us, too. There is enough and more than enough for all.

This is who Jesus is to us. This is the one in whose name we and others can find healing, freedom, and salvation. Jesus, Son of God, who is Risen, is our Good Shepherd! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!