

April 22, 2018
Fourth Sunday of Easter
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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

John 10:11-18

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the tenth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus said:] ¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

The Lord is my shepherd.

What fitting Scriptures we have for Earth Day.

I hope you have the chance to connect to the beauty of the Earth
sometime today or this week.

I hope you can take everything off the hook long enough
to breathe a little deeper the air that connects us all.

These pastoral passages of the Bible actually make me a little sad
sometimes,

because they remind me how disconnected I usually am
from the natural beauty of the world God gives to our care.

And it is a testimony to the power of this poetry that,
even for those of us far removed from the culture
of caring for animals and tending the land,
there is such deep comfort still to be found in the 23rd Psalm.

And whether we love and know this psalm by heart or hardly know
it at all,

hopefully today we can listen still more closely
and listen beyond what we have heard before.

The opening lines allow us to settle in to a sense of rest...

we might even envision ourselves lying down in green pastures,
slowly walking beside still waters...feeling the restoration of
our souls.

Are you thirsty for your soul to be restored today? Are you?

Oh my goodness...what would that feel like?

But, lest we become settled in the green pasture...

the psalm doesn't stay here...it doesn't stay in stillness, either.

The Lord leads us on...along pathways of righteousness...that word...

pathways...in Hebrew is like a description of the ruts left in the road

by the wheels of carts.

The Lord leads us where the right way has been worn into the earth.

I wonder what sights you find along the path of wheel-ruts of righteousness?

Then we come to the valley...to the shadow of death...

and the Lord doesn't lead us around it...

or keep us from having to walk through it.

We face the valley...but we do not face it alone.

The Lord goes with us.

God prepares us a feast in front of our enemies.

What mental image do you see when you imagine that feast?

What does it mean to have a table set before our enemies?

Why does the Lord do this?

Does it keep us on our guard...eating in front of our enemies...

maybe always one hand ready to grab the steak knife?

Are we supposed to invite them to join us?

Or perhaps, is God showing us how joy and celebration
and simple nourishment can be powerful acts of defiance and
courage.

Celebration and joy can be acts of resistance...

Like the dance parties held outside the homes of anti-gay
legislators...

I've seen communion shared in spaces of protest and danger.

The power of that meal of thanksgiving is so clear in places like
that.

It reminds me that there are people whose worship
is always in a place of danger...

that there are those who sing Alleluia and celebrate communion...
in the face of death week after week.

And then journey continues, as the psalm draws near an end,
with goodness and mercy following us along...

not even just following...but chasing...pursuing God's precious
ones.

What is it like for goodness and mercy to chase you down?

Well...when I was little we had a dog named Misty.

She loved to go to the lake.

She loved to swim...and if we went out in the boat,

she would swim after us. She would not let us go without her.

There was more than one time she got herself so far from shore
we thought she wouldn't be able to get back.

and if you've never watched a grown man

trying to drag a sopping wet dog up into a canoe on open water...

well the point is, she wouldn't let it go.

We had to lock her in the house before we put out the boats.

That is how goodness and mercy will follow you...

That is what it is like to always be brought home again in the presence of God.

And *that* is what it is like to have Jesus as our Good Shepherd.

It seems like the books of Acts and First John

want to pull us towards living with Christ as our example...

becoming more like the Good Shepherd ourselves...

and maybe we really should...

but reading the Psalms and John's gospel,

it is so clear how far we will always be from being like Jesus.

The best of us might have Good Shepherd moments or even days...

but we will also have days when we are much more like the hired hand...

ready to run and give up everyone else to save ourselves.

This may seem like sort of an odd connection...

but I believe this is one reason we would do well to be more careful

of valorizing any person or group of people.

Stay with me.

I saw a pastor post a link on Facebook to an article

about last week's emergency landing of the Southwest Airlines flight

and the pilot, retired from the Navy, Tammie Jo Shults,
who served so bravely to bring the plane down safely.

The pastor's comment said, "I found my sermon illustration for Sunday,"

or something like that.

And, I get it. Tammie Jo had a Good Shepherd day...

and it sounds like she has had many others.

But wouldn't it be too much to expect of her

that she would really be a Good Shepherd?

We do this to so many heroes...

and then are so disappointed when we learn about their failings...
their human-ness.

Gandhi, King, Mother Teresa...our own Martin Luther...

They had Good Shepherd work to do.

And they also fell so far short in their own ways.

Tammie Jo and Martin are no more or less Jesus than you or I

(which is to say, that we are all equally given the gift of bearing
Christ's life

and righteousness in baptism...and we all need it desperately...
so we all are and aren't Jesus in the same measure).

Our heroes of history aren't the Good Shepherd.

Neither are police officers...or teachers...or clergy...or mothers...

or any other group of people that we lift up as a noble
monolith...

because we all may have Good Shepherd days...
and we will all also fail each other.

It does no one any favors to valorize someone
in a way that sets them up to fall short...

and to not offer a real path forward when they do fail.
It doesn't do any good to those who suffer because of those
failures...

nor does it do any good to those we lionize.
We need realistic systems of accountability
that don't operate on the assumption that we are good shepherds.
If we paint a picture that doesn't anticipate failure
than we have forgotten who Jesus is and who we are.

We should probably spend more time preparing
for how we will work for reconciliation with one another
when we let each other down.

Because we aren't good shepherds...we aren't even shepherds...
We aren't even hired hands.

We are the Good Shepherd's sheep.

We are the ones who God knows by name.

And we aren't the *only* ones...
Jesus reminds us, that he has more sheep than we know
about...
and that we are all one flock, even if we don't know each other
yet,

and we have one Good Shepherd...just one...

who shows us green pastures to lie in,

leads us beside still waters,

restores our souls...

who leads us along the journey following the wheel tracks of righteousness.

Even under the shadow of death, he doesn't leave us alone.

He puts out a feast for us in front of our enemies,

so they can see us celebrate life

when they are plotting death and destruction.

The Good Shepherd brings along goodness and mercy to nip at our heels...

and always brings us back to the fold of God's house.

Dear sheep, rest and journey well in the care of your Shepherd,

remember who you are and whose you are...

because God knows you and loves you, today and always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.