Fourth Weekend of Easter (RCL/A) 2020

Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

May 2-3, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Psalm 23: the most beloved of all. If folks know any psalm by heart, it's probably this one. Not that most of us, living at the Jersey Shore, know much about sheep and shepherds, except our up-close-and-personal encounters at petting zoos or Atlantic Farms. So I'm always looking for insights into this beautiful but kinda "outa-my-experience" psalm-song. A man named Phillip Keller grew up in East Africa, moved to British Columbia, and actually worked as a shepherd. He was a man of faith and wrote a book called *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*[1]. I pulled it off my bookshelf last week and found this message in the inside cover. It's a 2015 e-mail I printed out from Pastor Dave Nelson of St. Peter Lutheran down in Southport, NC, one of the congregations that reached out to us so faithfully and generously after Sandy. Here's what Pastor Nelson wrote, commenting on the verse, *"Jesus had compassion on them for they were like sheep without a shepherd"* (Mark 6:34):

I do remember an old seminary prof reminding us that "We already have a Good Shepherd. That is not you. You are to be the sheepdog. Try to keep 'em moving in the right direction and out of danger and don't just bark a lot." Peace, Dave+

*"The Lord is **my** Shepherd."* This first person perspective, this very personal reminder that **I am** part of the Lord's flock draws us right in. We love these intimate, God-and-me, Scripture passages and hymns…. "Here I am, Lord, is it I, Lord? I have heard You calling in the night…." "O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the works Thy hands have made….." "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me…." "Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine."

That last refrain is from a newer hymn, "You Are Mine," by David Haas. We know it is our Good Shepherd's voice, saying: "I have called you each by name…. I will bring you home."

We just heard in today's Gospel:

***He calls his own sheep by name** and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.* (John 10:3b-4)

The Good Shepherd is my favorite name for the Lord. On Easter morning I always hear the risen Lord call **me** by name when, in the garden, He speaks that beautiful, single word to Mary Magdalene: "Mary!" (John 20:16) He speaks **your** name, too. But it's so important for us to remember that though He loves us **individually**, He also loves **the whole flock** and every member of it.

I can only imagine how long this painting has been hanging in Fellowship Hall. It both cracks me up and touches my heart that there is a **black sheep** in the Good Shepherd's flock! Have you ever wondered how we got that term? Apparently every once in a while, a black lamb is born into an otherwise white flock. 'Used to be, at least in Great Britain, that black wool fetched less money than white, hence the suggestion that a "black sheep," the odd one out, is of less value.

Not so in the Shepherd's flock. Every one of us is of inestimable value, unspeakably precious.   If our lives were laid bare, there might be something in each one of them that would make us the black sheep. 'Might have to do with prior relationships, substance dependencies, a juvie record, an adult rap sheet, ways we've compromised our values, past life choices that now make us cringe, who we were and what we did in "another life," so to speak. 'Doesn't matter!! The Good Shepherd loves us, unconditionally.

Notice, though: except for the odd occasion when a lamb strays and the Shepherd has to leave the 99 and go into the wilderness to retrieve the one that has nibbled itself lost, we will find the Good Shepherd **with the flock**. Remember last week, talking about the disciples from Emmaus, we discussed how Jesus broke the bread, His dinner companions finally recognized Him, then He immediately disappeared?   We said that in order to "keep" Him, we have to go with Him! Well, the best way to stay close to the Good Shepherd is to stick with the flock!

Some of you can guess where I'm going with this. Next week is Mother's Day, which would have been the end of Sunday School if we'd been able to have Sunday School. Every year I go through my annual spring depression, seeing so many of our families drop off the radar for the entire summer. Those words, "See you in the fall, Pastor Mary!' are daggers to my heart. Personally, this is because I love you and miss seeing you when you "take the summer off". Pastorally, this is because the Word of God and the Sacrament of Holy Communion are "the means of grace," the channels by which God's love streams to us through our five senses and nourishes our souls.

Many of you have been joining us for remote worship on weekends because sports have been cancelled. You haven't had to choose between practice or games or tournaments and worship. If the beaches open, will I lose you to sun and fun?? And even as I say this, I realize I'm the sheep dog barking!! Just remember: the sheep dog loves you. Even more importantly, though, remember: the Good Shepherd loves you. Unconditionally. Just remember: the best way to stay close to the Good Shepherd is to stick with the flock! This weekend's lesson from the First Letter of Peter (2:25) ends, "*For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*"

Part of mature faith going beyond "Jesus and me" is realizing that each of us also bears responsibility for the well-being of the flock. When we're led to green pastures and still waters and paths of righteousness, we're not solo sheep: we're part of the flock. No one is meant to travel through the valley of the shadow alone, nor is anyone going to be seated at a table for one in the Lord's banquet hall. We are called to accompany each other, and sometimes to be junior shepherds as well as subbing for those beloved sheepdogs aptly named Shirley, Goodness and Mercy.

My favorite book about Psalm 23 is by Rabbi Harold Kushner: *The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm*. He writes:

There are Jewish legends about adults or children who impulsively reach out to help a beggar in rags, only to discover that the beggar is the messiah in disguise, waiting for someone to show him kindness, at which point he will reveal himself and redeem all that is broken in the world. But in today's world, perhaps it is not the beggar who is the disguised redeemer but the one who reaches out to the beggar. When we volunteer for a soup kitchen, when we staff a late-night hot line for frantic, despairing callers, when we tutor children who have difficulty learning, when we set aside our own priorities and vote for policies that will make ours a more compassionate society, we are acting as one of God's anointed. We are the messiah for somebody if not for everybody.

That is how the messianic age will arrive. That is how we will fashion a world more livable than the world we currently inhabit, a world where the wolf will lie down with the lamb and people will no longer hurt one another – not be responding to the world's brokenness as children might, by denying that we made the mess and begging or praying for someone to come and clean it up, but by responding as adults should, each of us doing our little bit to make the world whole.[2]

Of course, we Christians believe the Good Shepherd **is** the Messiah who has already come. We also believe that we are to live our lives as little Christs. Regularly nourished by God's grace in worship, through Word & Sacrament, we're to help the Shepherd care for His flock, continuing His saving work in this world as the Spirit opens doors, each day. Amen

[1]W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

[2]Harold S. Kushner, *The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm* (NY: Anchor Books, 2004), pp. 143-144.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham