

Fourth Weekend of Easter (RCL/C): Good Shepherd Weekend
Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30
May 7-8, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A couple of our church friends are up in years and in poor health. I was visiting and as they talked I felt increasing overwhelmed by the challenges they face. Then came one of the most beautiful expressions of faith I've ever heard. One spouse said to the other, "Look: the Lord will either help us here or take us Home. What He **won't** do is abandon us. He's **with** us, so everything will be okay regardless of what happens." Very matter-of-fact. Rock solid trust. The fruit of a lifetime of believing, being in intimate relationship with the Savior, faithfulness in prayer, presence in worship, love of Scripture, devotion in serving. Our church friend doesn't just **know of** the Good Shepherd. She **knows** the Good Shepherd, trusts the Good Shepherd, loves the Good Shepherd.

She can say, along with the psalmist, *The LORD is **my** shepherd*. Martin Luther once said, "Even the devil can say, 'There is a God.' But the devil cannot say, 'This is **my** God.'" This description of the Lord Jesus as our Good Shepherd is **so** important that every year the 4th weekend of Easter is devoted to the Good Shepherd. There's lots of artwork of the Good Shepherd. In Fellowship Hall is a painting of the Good Shepherd leading a flock (which interestingly includes a black sheep). I have a little sculpture of the Good Shepherd cradling a lamb, a replica of the original in the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. I have a prayer card we gave to the children one Good Morning, Good Friday, also showing the Good Shepherd cradling a lamb, but with nail marks visible in the Good Shepherd's hands.

So what's the message?? What's it supposed to mean that Jesus is our Good Shepherd? I don't think too many of us are terribly familiar with real life shepherds or sheep. But what's our best guess? What are the qualities of **a** good shepherd and therefore of **our** good shepherd? First from today's

Gospel from John:

- **Love of the flock.**
 - He calls them by name.... ("He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." John 10:3b)

- He protects them.... (*"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."* John 10:10)
- He's willing to give His life for them. (*"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* John 10:11, 15)
- He offers them Life beyond this life. (*"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."* John 10:28)

Psalm 23 reminds us of other shepherding duties and labors of love:

- **Provision of everything the flock needs:** *"I shall not be in want,"* i.e., *"I lack nothing I truly need."* That includes:
 - **Leading of the flock** to good pasture: food, water:
*He makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters.*

(Sheep are spooked by fast-running water and won't drink from it, so shepherd uses staff/crook to form a perimeter of stones and create a quiet pool within it. The Good Shepherd blesses us with the living water of Holy Baptism.)

- *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*
(The rod beats away wolves and other predators....)
- *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over.*
(Enemies may be figurative- may not be people at all. Anointing occurs in Baptism, and Bread and Cup are present in Holy Communion.)
- *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.* (See above: *"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."* John 10:28)

The parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) that our Lord Jesus tells leaves no doubt about another characteristic of the Good Shepherd: each lamb is precious. There's a flock of 100, and when 1 goes missing, the Good Shepherd doesn't shrug and say, "Oh, well, there's more where that came from!" The Good Shepherd leaves the 99 to find the 1 straggler that has nibbled itself lost. Just as to a parent no child is "replaceable," to the Good Shepherd, no sheep is replaceable. Each one is irreplaceable, precious beyond words, worth giving up His life for.

It's Mother's Day weekend. The image of our Lord cradling a lamb is very maternal, very feminine, we could say, fitting a cultural stereotype we associate more with a woman than a man. But there's a great photo in the skylit hallway between the main building of Jersey Shore University Medical Center

and the NW Pavilion. It's of a man with greying hair holding a newborn baby close to his chest. I've always imagined that to be the obstetrician who delivered the baby. No surprise to us, men are tender, too. We could say that a shepherd protecting the flock by beating off a wolf with a club is a masculine image. And yet, Heaven knows, women are strong, too (cf. "Mama Bear"!). In Barbara Kingsolver's book *Flight Behavior*, just discussed in our Justice & Peace-sponsored book club last week, there's a scene in which a woman picks up a newborn lamb that isn't breathing. She grabs it by the legs and repeatedly swings it in an arc over her head till its lungs get going. Startling! But the person in the role of shepherd does whatever is necessary to preserve and nurture life. Our Good Shepherd certainly has and does.

This Sunday, May 8, isn't just Mother's Day, isn't just Good Shepherd Sunday. It's also the day on the calendar when we remember Julian of Norwich, that 14th century English mystic who experienced Christ as our Mother. She wrote:

*I saw that he is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing, for he is that love which wraps and enfolds us, embraces us and guides us, surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us...*¹

"Takes us back to our church friend's deep wisdom: "Look: the Lord will either help us here or take us Home. What He **won't** do is abandon us. He's **with** us, so everything will be okay regardless of what happens." Julian's way of saying that is: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." We have a Good Shepherd who loves us well, who is powerful to save. We don't just **know** of a Good Shepherd. Lord-willing, we **know** the Good Shepherd. He certainly knows and loves us. Amen

¹ *Julian of Norwich: Showings (The Classics of Western Spirituality Series)*. Mahway: Paulist Press. 1978), p. 130.

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