

Fourth Weekend of Easter (RCL/B): "The Shepherd Who Is Also the Lamb"
Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18
April 20-21, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Our Jewish brothers and sisters will celebrate Passover on Monday evening, a 3,000 year old ritual celebrating God's freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Jewish families will remember the 10 plagues God sent because Pharaoh didn't heed the divine command, "Let My people go!" A drop of wine will be spilled onto the dinner plate for each plague that is named. The last plague, of course, was the killing of the firstborn male in every house not marked with lamb's blood. The angel of death **passed over** the dwellings whose doorposts and lintels were splattered with the blood of the lamb that had been slaughtered for the last meal before a hurried departure from the land of slavery, eaten standing, with sandals on the feet and staff in hand.

In today's Gospel our Lord Jesus says, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* (John 10:11) We call Him not the Passover lamb, but the Paschal (Easter) Lamb. He's the One of whom John the Baptist said, *"There is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."* (John 1:29) In one of our Eucharistic prayers we pray, "Dying You destroyed our death, rising You restored our life." Our Lord Jesus, both the Lamb of God **and** the Good Shepherd, died **physically** to save us **spiritually**. He did it because:

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

Everlasting life **doesn't** come from intellectually signing on to a set of religious beliefs but from being in a living relationship with the Savior **now** and not just later. Our Lord says, *"I know my own and my own know me."* (John 10:14b) That word "know" doesn't

just mean Jesus knows our name and address. It means He sees and understands us, inside and out, in all our splendor and all our sordidness, the glory moments and the ones that make us blush with shame. He sees us as we **really** are, and knows us better than we know ourselves. How well do **we** “know” **Him**? The question isn’t, “How much do we know **about** Him?” The question is, “How well do we “know” **Him**? Do we realize He wants to be in a loving relationship with us?? Not just **all** of us, but **each** of us, and **you**, in particular. Our Lord longs for an ever-deepening loving relationship with us, not just **all** of us, but **each** of us, and **you**, in particular. God’s grace channeled through the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to “know” our Savior, and not just know **about** Him.

The older we get, the more harmful actions and hurtful words we come to regret. The memories of our moral or emotional low points in the past can drain our energy in the present and stymie our hopes for the future. But to truly know our Savior is to experience His power to save us from what enslaves us, holds our dreams hostage, imprisons our spirit, whether our anxiety is related to past, present or future. In my *Celtic Daily Prayer Book* I came across this reflection:

God can take events of the past and weave them so skillfully into a new plan for us that not only do we find there is a future for us after all, but it is as if there have been no wasted years.¹

It continues with this quote from David Adams’ book *The Edge of Glory* (under the header “Christ Behind Me,” as in the Breastplate of St. Patrick, the Deer’s Cry):

There Christ walks in your past. He walks in all the dark rooms you pretend are closed, that He may bring light. Invite Him into your past. Experience His forgiveness, His acceptance of you. Offer especially all that you are ashamed of... all that you wish to forget... all that still pains and hurts you... all the hurt you have caused others. Walk there in the places you are afraid of, knowing that He walks with you and will lead you on!²

That's real intimacy: trusting another person or our Lord enough to expose our vulnerabilities and shortcomings, hopeful that honesty will deepen rather than destroy the relationship, and praying that revealing the hurt we've experienced **or** caused will make healing possible. That's a risk with people; but we can be sure our Lord will forgive and not reject.

The psalm we hear this Good Shepherd weekend is, not surprisingly, Psalm 23, which begins "*The Lord is my shepherd.*" You can find it in the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* books in the pews. There's no page number, but I can tell you that the 150 psalms are the first 150 hymns in the song section! (They're in numerical order ☺.) Let's read it together.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
³ he restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil,
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff,
 they comfort me.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
 my whole life long.

Psalm 23 will always make me think of dear Anne Brown and make me smile. Years ago Anne had a spell during worship and was taken to the narthex while we waited for the first aid squad. She was lying on the floor and I knelt next to her. Knowing her great love of Scripture, and knowing Psalm 23 by heart, I decided to recite it to her, hoping it would

bring comfort. After she was all recovered, days later, she told me my choice of Scripture had convinced her she was dying! I was startled and asked “Why?” then the light went on: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death....” Not a necessarily encouraging voice to the person in crisis who’s waiting for the paramedics to arrive! Lesson learned! ‘Haven’t done **that** again!

My point being: I associate Psalm 23 with life, not death! I encourage you to do the same. There are plenty of dark valleys to pass through in this life that don’t involve literal death. This psalm **as well as** Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel tell us we are divinely accompanied and cared for every day of our lives, never alone in our trials and sorrows **or** in our victories and joys. The more living, active, vibrant our relationship is with the Lord, the more we’re apt to experience His saving presence.

Martin Luther’s take on Psalm 23 is that it’s a metaphor for the Word and the Sacraments, Holy Communion and Holy Baptism, the means of grace by which our God blesses the beloved with life, forgiveness of sins and salvation. It’s through the Word (including Psalm 23!) and through Holy Baptism and Holy Communion that we access the blessing of green pastures for holy rest and soul nourishment, still waters to revive parched spirits, right roads to travel in integrity, the shepherd’s rod to protect and discipline us, the shepherd’s crook to redirect and guide us, the laden table to feed us, the fragrant oil to mark us as the chosen, and the sheepdogs “Shirley, Goodness and Mercy” ☺ nipping at our heels and pursuing us, keeping us on the path of life and herding us away from danger.

Just so I don’t imagine that the Good Shepherd has a flock of one (me, myself and I), Jesus says, “I lay down my life for the sheep [plural].” He states:

"I 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." (John 10:16)

And in today's lesson from 1 John we're told:

¹⁶ We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?¹⁸ Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.

(1 John 3:16-18, The Message)

Our relationship with Jesus informs our relationship with our brothers and sisters. When we draw close to Him we draw closer to them, just like spokes on a wheel get closer to each other as they approach the hub in the middle.

Passover celebrates not just the Exodus, the freeing from slavery in Egypt long ago, but liberation from everyone and everything that has ever enslaved the Jewish people. Every time we celebrate Holy Communion we celebrate the saving death and liberating resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks for our baptismal and eucharistic sharing in the gifts of life, forgiveness and salvation. We look to the Lamb of God, the Good Shepherd, rejoicing that we are members of His flock. Amen

¹*Celtic Daily Prayer* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), p. 348.

² David Adam, *The Edge of Glory* (Triangle/SPCK, 1985), quoted in above, p. 348.

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