

The Good Shepherd

April 25, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Easter

St. Andrew Lutheran Church

I've always loved this Sunday in the church year, the one we commonly call Good Shepherd Sunday. That probably has to do with the fact that my "home" congregation was Good Shepherd Lutheran Church up in Gaithersburg, Maryland. The original sanctuary had a huge contemporary stained-glass window of a shepherd with a sheep draped across the back of his neck. As a youngster, I spent many a worship service focused on that window and all the beautiful colored pieces of glass.

We've probably heard much over the years about shepherds and sheep. There's the whole notion of sheep not being the brightest of creatures, prone to wander and get themselves into trouble, and the shepherd seeking out every last one to rescue them, and laying down their life to keep the sheep herd safe. That often leads to conversation about the connection of the divine/human relationship: us humans being the sheep (and heaven knows we do wander and are quick to get ourselves into all sorts of fixes!) and Jesus being the Good Shepherd who guides and tends us. This is good stuff, and it is comforting for sure.

Speaking of comfort, many among us may be quick to turn to the twenty-third psalm when we need comfort and consolation. This psalm has long been read at the bedside of the sick and a mainstay of many funerals and memorial services. There's a reason for this. It speaks to our very real, very human desires and our very needs. We don't want to want for anything. We don't want to be full of fear. We desire abundance and assurance of safety. In this psalm, we hear of the Lord being our shepherd. This is an example of shepherd as both a noun and a verb: the noun defines a shepherd as one who tends and rears sheep. Shepherd in verb form means to tend (as in tending sheep); or to guide or direct in a particular direction. The shepherd in the twenty-third psalm provides for basic needs like nourishment and safety and guides us through times of trial and peril. If we look at this psalm as a whole, we can see that it isn't a stationary experience – the psalmist is on the move. There's a journey happening here. From the pastures and

waters to pathways and valleys, through it all, the shepherd is faithfully present, providing for great care and safety.

There's an interesting translation option for the last verse of the psalm. It suggests substituting the words 'only' for 'surely' and 'pursue' for 'follow,' so it would say "Only goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life..." This makes some sense when you think of pursue in the way we normally might – it seems like it's enemies and trouble that often pursue us throughout our lives. So if we look at it with the suggested replacements, it is even more reassuring to know that **only** goodness and mercy will be pursuing us.

Holding fast to the words of our beloved twenty-third psalm, we listen to our gospel text for this morning. Jesus speaks one of his "I AM" statements in John's gospel, saying "I am the good shepherd." I don't know about you, but it sure feels like we could use a good shepherd these days. Our nation has experienced so many divisions over so many issues that it's hard to keep up with what we're supposed to be angry about each week. Those of us in the Sunday evening book study group have been reading through the book "I Think You're Wrong (But I'm Listening)" and we have had lots of conversations about how painful some of these divides can be, causing rifts between groups, friends, and even in families. It seems as if we have forgotten how to live together with basic civility and respect.

In the text from John, Jesus talks about having other sheep that do not belong to this fold, sheep that must also be brought in, and that there will be one flock and one shepherd. That feels a little difficult to grasp. What can that mean? On the broadest level, this can refer to anyone who hasn't had a chance to hear the good news of God. In the time this gospel was written, this would have meant the gentiles. Within the Christian community, it feels as if this call for one flock and one shepherd is an expansive call for unity in our diversity. We are so busy pointing out how different we are from each other in our faith and denominational divisions that we lose sight of how much we have in common. On a more localized level, congregations are called to unity in diversity as well. Who in our communities hasn't heard of what God has done and is doing in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus? Who needs to hear the good news? Who is excluded from our family because of who they are, who they love, where they live (or

don't live), or what opinions they might have? Who are our neighbors and what do they need? How can we accompany them through their lives with love and grace in the same ways our Good Shepherd does?

Shepherds are known for knowing each of their sheep. Our Good Shepherd knows each of us. Values each of us. Consider that for a moment. Out of the billions of people on this planet, you are known. You are important and you matter. No matter how far we stray, our shepherd looks out for us, even gives his life for us. How can we not feel called to extend the peace and reassurance that give us to folks who haven't heard this great news.

The ways in which our society is so divided most certainly grieves the heart of God. May we be repairers of some of those divisions in whatever ways we are able. May we embrace diversity and be willing to listen to one another. May our welcome of differences extend beyond mere words and be turned into actions. And may we be moved to share the wonderful gift we have – the deep comfort of being tended to, of being guided along our life's journey. So many people are yearning to hear that they count, that they are known. May we make Christ known in our lives.

Amen.