

**April 22, 2018**

**4th Sunday of Easter**

**John 10:11-18 (Year B)**

**Lutheran Church of Our Father, Greensboro, NC**

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!) So a couple of years ago I was in the Holy Land and we got to spend a little bit of time in the Judean Wilderness, an area of that land that's still very undeveloped. And as we traveled through this region we saw and met some of the Bedouin people who live in this desert. Now the Bedouins are a nomadic people who live in the desert region of Israel and Palestine basically as modern-day shepherds. They live in tents and makeshift camps and are constantly on the move, packing up camp and moving on to a new location as they herd their sheep and goats to greener pastures. And these people are the descendants of the descendants of the descendants of people who have been doing this very thing in this very place for thousands and thousands of years, all the way back into Old Testament days.

After we encountered them for the first time I remember our tour guide telling us a story about them that I'll never forget. He said that a few years back the Israeli government was really wanting to get the Bedouin people to have a permanent address. They didn't want them just floating out in the desert and it was so important to them that the Bedouins have a permanent residency that they said they would build them condominiums that the people could just have, for free, no strings attached. And so they did. They built these condos out in the desert and gave them to the people so that they would have a permanent address. And a few months went by and someone went out to check on the people and see how things were going, and they discovered all of the Bedouin people still living in their tents... and all of their sheep living in the condos.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, and I just love this image of what a good shepherd looks like. Shepherds who aren't thinking of themselves, but only think about providing shelter and security for their sheep. Shepherds who will sleep in a tent, and endure hardships and difficulties if it means that their sheep don't have to. Certainly this is the type of shepherd we hear about in Psalm 23. That's our assigned psalm for the day, for obvious reasons. And even though we didn't read the whole thing, because we typically don't in our worship here, I imagine we've all heard it before:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 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 is a psalm of trust. In this psalm we hear about how we can trust God to provide for us, and guide us, and protect us. When we say “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” we are *not* saying that we won’t want more things. We aren’t talking about being less consumeristic. What the text is really saying is we will want for nothing. We shall not be in wanting. Elsewhere in the Old Testament this same word is translated as “lacking nothing.” So what we are saying is the “Lord is my shepherd, so there is nothing that I lack.” God provides me with food by leading me to green pastures. God provides me with water by leading me to still pools. God provides me with protection by leading me along straight paths and staying alongside me even in the darkest valleys.

The point is that we can put our trust in God, who is our Good Shepherd, and will guide us, and will provide for us, and will protect us and be everything that we need. Whatever we experience – be it green pastures or valleys of death – we can trust that the Good Shepherd will sustain and provide for and care for His sheep.

Which leads us to today’s gospel text, where Jesus names himself as our Good Shepherd. And then talks at length about what the Good Shepherd is willing to do for his sheep. This Sunday marks a bit of a jump in our reflection on the resurrection. Up until now our gospel texts have been focused on the events of the resurrection and its aftermath. They’ve focused on reminding us what happened. But this week our gospel focuses instead on what it all means. How do we make sense of Christ’s death and resurrection? Why did it happen? And what does it mean?

We tend to remember this gospel passage as the place where Jesus names himself as the Good Shepherd, but we maybe forget that the focus of the passage is explaining what exactly that means. In this one short paragraph Jesus talks about laying down his life five times. Laying down his life for the sheep. He says that the hired hand sees a wolf coming and high tails it out of there. The hired hand isn’t risking his life for some sheep. But the shepherd is. The shepherd is willing to sleep outside in her tent while the sheep stay in the new condo. The shepherd is willing to lay down her life for her sheep.

And this is the sort of Good Shepherd that Jesus is. Jesus is the shepherd that we read of in Psalm 23. The one who guides us to green pastures. The one who provides us with still waters. The one who protects us from dangerous paths and dark valleys, even if the cost of that protection is his own life. Jesus makes it abundantly clear: the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And there are two things about this statement that carry important meaning for our reflection on the resurrection.

First, is that it demonstrates willingness. Jesus is willing to die for the sake of his sheep. In fact, we could push this even further and say that Jesus is willing to die for the sake of *all* sheep. Whereas we tend to draw boundaries, and decide who is “in” and who is “out”, here Jesus makes perfectly clear that he has no interest in this business. He says, “I have other sheep

who do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” Jesus’ willingness to lay down his life isn’t limited to certain flocks. He isn’t only willing to die for the best sheep, or the Lutheran sheep, or the sheep who are in church every single Sunday, or the sheep who voted for a certain person, or the sheep who live in a certain place. Rather, as we busy ourselves with dividing into factions, and tribes, and parties, Jesus reminds us that he lays down his life for his sheep of every fold. He is willing to die for *all*.

The second thing that sheds important light on the resurrection is how this passage also demonstrates control. It is not just that Jesus is *willing* to lay down his life, it is also that he *chooses* to do so. The language of laying down his life implies that he is the one in charge here. His life is not being taken. It is being given.

It is a reminder that as we reflect on Christ’s death and resurrection, we should remember who was in control in the story. And it’s Jesus. In the garden Jesus is not overpowered and subdued. Rather he chooses to give himself over to his captors. When on trial Jesus does not attempt to get himself off the hook and escape his doom. Rather he chooses to endure all that they throw at him. And even on the cross, Jesus does not resist his sacrificial death. But rather he decides when it is finished, and he gives up his spirit. We in our sinfulness might have chosen the cross for our Christ. But Jesus chooses to bear it. He gives himself over to it. He lays down his life.

And these things are important, because they demonstrate the depths of Christ’s love for us and the reality of what that sacrificial love looks like. Sacrificial love is not merely a willingness to give of oneself if push comes to shove. And it is not merely giving oneself out of obligation or coercion. It is decisive and intentional. Sacrificial love is freely and willingly giving of ourselves. It is laying things down. Laying down our time, so that we might serve others in need. Laying down our comfort, so that we might go to the uncomfortable spaces in our society and enter into relationship with those we meet there. Laying down our lives, so that the gospel of Christ’s love might be shown.

This is the love of shepherd of Psalm 23, whose concern is only to guide, provide for, and protect the sheep. This is the love of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who knows his sheep and is known by them, who will not let his sheep be snatched up by any wolf, and whose sacrificial love is greater than Bedouin shepherds who sleep outside so that their sheep can have the condos. His sacrificial love is one where he lays down his very life, so that his sheep might be safe, and saved, and joined to him in eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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