

April 30, 2023  
Good Shepherd Sunday

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

\*Call to Worship

O Come let us worship and bow down.  
Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.

**For the Lord is our God;  
we are the Lord's people;  
the flock that God shepherds.**

Prayer of the Day

**God of all power,  
you called from death our Lord Jesus,  
the great shepherd of the sheep.  
Send us as shepherds to rescue the lost,  
to heal the injured,  
and to feed one another.  
with knowledge and understanding.  
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

\*Hymn 39 Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Prayer of Confession

**Merciful God,  
We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed,  
by what we have done and what we have left undone.  
We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength.  
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.  
In your mercy, forgive us, and call us back to your fold, that we may walk in your ways  
and delight in your will, to the glory of your name.**

\*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me as I Am

**Assurance of Pardon**

Ours is a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
He gathers us to him as surely as the shepherd rescues his wayward flock.  
I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. We are safe in the arms of God.  
Be at peace. Amen.

First Reading Psalm 23

Time for Young Disciples

Gospel Reading John 10:11-18

The Morning Message

My next door neighbors have three grandchildren, two boys and a girl. Since their daughter and son-in-law both work, and they live in the area, the grandparents have provided child care from the days the children were born.

One day when a grandson was just a toddler, he toddled into the kitchen and held out his sippee cup, indicating that he wanted more of whatever it was he was drinking- water, juice, milk.

His grandmother took the cup and re-filled it, taking her eyes off the baby for just a second or two. When she turned around, he was passed out on the floor. Still as a stone. He didn't respond to her attempts to rouse him.

You can imagine the fear that pierced her heart. She gathered him up and ran for the phone to call 9-1-1. Then she called her husband, who worked in the west end of Huntington, yet, somehow he arrived before the paramedics!

More than one emergency vehicle showed up on Iroquois Trail, lights flashing, sirens blaring, ramping up the anxiety.

By this time, little Adam had regained consciousness, but, he was showing signs that he had suffered a seizure. He had no history of seizures at all, which is one reason the incident was so terrifying.

Of course, he was transported to the hospital asap.

We have good neighbors. Three sets of us moved into our present homes in 1987. We've taken care of each other's kids, borrowed cups of sugar, fixed each other's sinks and computers, picked up the paper and mail for each other when we are away. And so much more. We are blessed.

So, naturally I headed to the hospital. My clergy ID badge got me into the ER and to the exam room where I would find Adam, looking so very small in that hospital bed, his mother's arms around him, and his grandparents just a breath away, speaking to him in soothing tones.

I've been in a few ERs and have witnessed some pretty scary things. But, as I stepped into the room, I saw something I had never before seen and it was so profound and so deep that I felt the roots of my hair tingle.

The women acknowledged my presence, but, didn't take their eyes off Adam. The grandfather turned toward me.

One look at his face and I knew...  
I knew the man would die for that little boy.

Thankfully, a few days and lots of tests later, it was determined that Adam's seizure was not a sign of some life-threatening condition. He had had a febrile seizure and the family learned about how to treat another one should it happen.

The gospel of John is known for the many "I am" statements of Jesus. We have a few of them in today's text.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep."  
"I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep, and my sheep know me-just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-and I lay down my life for the sheep."

In Jesus' day, it was commonplace to see shepherds all over the landscape. The Judean countryside was a rough and craggy plateau. The distance between Bethel and Hebron was about 35 miles. The width of the plateau was around 14 feet across. The land dropped off sharply on each side, a death sentence if a sheep or shepherd should fall.

So, the safety of the flock was of primary concern. The dangers were many: predators like wolves and predators in human form-thieves and robbers.

The shepherd had few tools: an animal skin in which food was carried, a club imbedded with nails for fighting off the wild beats, a staff, with a hooked end to retrieve a straying sheep.

And a good shepherd had instinct and intuition. He could anticipate the needs of his flock. He could sense the lurking threats.

At night, the flock was herded into a sheepfold. It was typically a walled-off space with an opening to go into and out of. The shepherd would stretch out across the opening to prevent any of the flock from straying in the night and to avert any threats to their safety.

Jesus describes himself as the "good shepherd." In Greek, there are two words for "good."

The word “agathos” describes the moral quality of a thing. The word “kalos” means that a thing or a person is not only good, but in the goodness there is a sense of winsomeness, loveliness, beauty. In this text, when Jesus is referred to as “good,” it is written as “kalos,” meaning Jesus is more than efficient, or dutiful. There is a certain beauty, loveliness, sincerity, graciousness. When our family lived in Ohio, the girls’ pediatrician lived just down the street. He took piano lessons from Ed. We would often refer to him as “the good doctor.” By that we meant he was competent in his profession, and more than that, he cared about his patients outside the office. He was neighborly. He appreciated and supported the community in which he lived and worked.

The image of Jesus as the good shepherd holds within it a sense of fidelity and skill, for sure, but it also conjures up a rich description of the one who defines compassion and sympathy and love.

Which leads us to the most astounding of his comments. Contained in the “I am” discourse, is the greatest of revelations, the one thing that sets Jesus apart from all others: “And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

I found these words in Barclay’s commentary:

The difference is this (between the good and the bad shepherd) A real shepherd was born to his task. He was sent out with his flock as soon as he was old enough to go; he grew into the calling of a shepherd; the sheep became his friends and his companions, and it became second nature to think of them before he thought of himself.

The false shepherd came into shepherding not as a calling but as a means to an end. He did not care to learn of each sheep’s personality, or go the extra mile when presented with challenging circumstances. In fact, it was not unusual for some such people to run away from his post, abandoning his flock.

Jesus seems to be saying that our lives can be motivated by reward or motivated by love. When we are called to a task or responsibility, the man or woman who works for love thinks more about the people they are trying to serve than about him or herself.

Jesus was the good shepherd, who so loved his sheep that for their safety, he would risk, and one day give, his life.

Rev. David Roberts says the shepherd image of Jesus is one of gentle power, of someone who can control the uncontrollable in our world. And isn’t that what we want of Jesus?

We want Jesus to tame what is wild and unruly in the world, who, with the crook of his staff, can solve what is unsolvable and answer what is unanswerable in life, who can protect and defend against the thieves and bandits of this world who would steal, kill, and destroy.

While we hold that ideal image in our hearts, we also have to recognize that all is not sweetness and light in our world. The world can be an unpredictable place, with trouble and danger lurking around every corner. There are questions without answers, where good people are devastated by calamity and babies can have seizures.

He says he always assumed the shepherd was leading the flock to safety, and that is one of the shepherd's roles. But, with each day's sunrise, the shepherd wakes and calls the sheep to follow him out of the sheepfold. And they follow. Not to safety, but to the open wilderness. And it is in the wilderness that we find abundant danger but also where we find abundant life.

When we look over each of our texts today, we see three images of shepherding: the one being comforted, the shepherd who provides care, and the faith community as shepherd.

Psalm 23 recounts the experience of the psalmist being cared for by the Spirit of God. Being led to still waters, comforted as he walks through the valley of the shadow of death, whose life-long companions are named "goodness" and "mercy."

In the gospel passage, Jesus describes what it is like to be the one doing the shepherding: calling forth his sheep in a voice his flock recognizes as uniquely his. This is a generous shepherd, giving abundantly, sacrificially, laying down his very life for his own.

And then we have the Acts text which speaks of the community that shepherds. And I think it is a good description of where we, here on Main Street, find ourselves today. We are "one-anothering." We are caring for, shepherding, each other in ways that were off limits to us during the heights of the pandemic. A cup of coffee and a piece of cake become almost sacramental after the isolation we experienced. Planning a routine event like a work party, such as we have coming up this Saturday, generates enthusiasm rather than yawns. We have responded to a request for help for this summer's revived work camp. We are taking intentional steps as the beloved community living out God's call for us.

All these things are reflections of what we find in Acts 2: our shepherding of the flock involves generosity, hospitality, the gathering around worship, and rejoicing in simple togetherness.\*

If you think it doesn't sound like much, remember this: one of the most important needs of every human life is belonging...finding our identity within and among others who accept, affirm, and support us, offer counsel, look out for our welfare, love us.

A community of faith can give birth to such a culture that “one-anothers” its flock with all the best fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

The community as shepherd gathers around us in celebration at the font and walks with us in the valley of the shadow and welcomes us to the Church Triumphant.

This is our call.

This is our challenge.

This is our joy.

\*Jenna Smith, *The Christian Century*

\*Hymn I Cannot Tell Why He Whom Angels Worship, verses 1 and 2

\*Affirmation of Faith p.35 The Apostles' Creed

\*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Joys and Concerns of the Church  
Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

\*Hymn 607 Doxology

\*Prayer of Dedication

\*Hymn I Cannot Tell, Why He Whom Angels Worship, verses 3 and 4

\*Blessing

Go now, following the voice of the shepherd.

Fear no evil, for God is by your side.

Devote yourselves to the works of God, to words of mercy, to good deeds and to acts of love.

And may God wipe every tear from your eyes;

May Christ Jesus be your shepherd and all that you need;

And may the Holy Spirit tend you with goodness and love all the days of your life. Amen.

\*Postlude