

Good Shepherding
4th Easter – April 22, 2018

Acts 4:5-12

4:5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, **4:6** with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. **4:7** When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" **4:8** Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, **4:9** if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, **4:10** let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. **4:11** This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'
4:12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

1 John 3:16-24

3:16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. **3:17** 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? **3:18** Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. **3:19** And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him **3:20** whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. **3:21** Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; **3:22** and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. **3:23** And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. **3:24** All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

John 10:11-18

10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 10:12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away--and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 10:13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 10:14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 10:15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 10:16 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. 0:17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 10:18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

**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.**

It's the 4th Sunday in Easter again which means that we suburban Presbyterians get another visit today from the good shepherd. Most of us, unlike perhaps Jesus audience or the people for whom David wrote the 23rd Psalm, or people in the rolling hills of a place like Scotland have little knowledge of or relation to sheep. We get the Sunday school information about sheep, which worries me because fewer of us than ever are even getting that, you know that sheep are kind of dumb, have a mob kind of mentality, are prone to wander in search of the illusive greener pastures, etc., etc. We don't live in rolling hills dotted with the wooly creatures being led and gathered by a faithful sheep dog and a shepherd.

Still we like the imagery. We don't mind all that much being bunched in with unruly, ill mannered sheep because it means we get the good shepherd, too. It's o.k. to bear the labels of sheepdom if we also get the one who promises us to keep us in lush green grass and leads us to still waters to laze around. We surely like the idea of that shepherd who is willing and able to protect us, even

from ourselves, **although** we rarely take too kindly to any leading that's insistent, or any urging to go here or there and do this or that, that makes us uncomfortable in the slightest. We really want that shepherd, the really good shepherd, unlike the frauds and fakes out there, who is so dedicated to us as to not simply be willing to die for us – **but to die for us**. We like that. We like, if you will, being Easter sheep.

Maybe that's why the good shepherd shows up every year – after Easter. While we're still basking in the resurrection glow. While we still have 'alleluias' in our hearts and in our hymns. Before we get on with the business of being the church and get distracted. Before we do our summertime wandering and looking for green pastures with 18 flagged sticks in holes in the ground, or our own waters that might come with lounge chairs or a jet ski. Before we admit that yes, goodness and mercy are nice things, really nice things. But living for goodness and mercy isn't – well, maybe it isn't very sheep like. And we're sheep. And we are, after all, as we are prone to say when we want to excuse our behavior, when we go astray – we're only sheep == you know == we're only human. As if that explains away all behavior.

Besides we would argue, could argue, do argue – the world is more like the valley of the shadow of death where we have rods and staffs and green clad missiles to give us some sense of protection, than green pastures and still waters. The world is more like dinner sitting at the table with our enemies

discussing the nuclear question than resting, safely and securely in the house of the Lord forever.

We seem to be far away from a life that's mostly lazing around in a field of really nice green grass with sips of cool refreshment just over there in a lake of still blue water. We long to reconnect to a shepherd who is there for us, watching over us, making reservations for us in the next pasture making sure there's fresh clean water there, too. A shepherd who, when it's time to move from one place to another, leads down the right path because choosing a path at all is difficult. A shepherd who all the while stands vigilant over us to care for us when we're sick or hurt or afraid or alone, to protect us, rod and staff at the ready, from any would be harm.

And today John reminds us that this good shepherd is none other than Jesus, who is somehow most ironically also our sacrificial lamb, whose is so very willing to lay down his life – for us.

We know that the good shepherd will lay down life for the sheep. Jesus has done so for us. We know about his care for us, his concern for us, his devotion to us, his love for us. We know that Jesus is our Lord, and the Lord is our shepherd. It's what we want. It's what we need. **But** we don't always want to follow. Where this shepherd leads is not always the smooth ground. It is often rocky and filled with peril. It calls for absolute faith and trust, but we would rather rely on our own wisdom, our own faith in the things of the world, our own trust of

things, sticks and stones and slings and arrows and spears and guns and bombs that have never, ever kept us truly safe.

We seem to gloss over the fact that when the shepherd sets a place for us in the presence of our enemies sitting across the table looking over at us that they are looking at it their enemy too. He brought them to the table too. Enemies are never really us and them. It's always we and ...we. The cup poured at the table that's running over, those heads anointed with oil aren't just ours. The one with the apron tied around his waste carrying a tray of bread and wine, of body and blood, the one who serves us died for -- all of us.

We like, sheep, do stray. We leave the shepherd's side out of fear. Fear of the dark valleys, the unknown, the seen and unseen threats of the world. And in our fear other voices beckon to us promising us greener valleys, and fresher water, and safety..., but say little about paths of righteousness.

Even still, our Shepherd keeps calling to us. When we find ourselves drained by the pitfalls of life, exhausted by the struggle to survive, engorged by the excess of our living. . . the shepherd calls.

On this good shepherd earth day the good shepherd invites us to come and enjoy green pastures and still waters while there's still some left.

But just being sheep isn't everything. **“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”**

This good shepherd, our good shepherd tells us that goodness and mercy are about loving one another. And today, after Easter, he invites us to be for him, his body. To be good and shepherds for one another.

Do we understand that every act of good, every act of kindness, every thought of peace, every movement away from evil and towards the good, every effort to undo cruelty, every person's passion for justice, every hungry child fed, every response to the seemingly impossible, every refusal to be led on any path that is not the right path, every program and plan that provides life giving water to the thirsty, every bag of groceries, jar of jelly and work of kindness at the food pantry, every lesson taught to children starving to come to know the voice of the shepherd, every moment in any day when there is for that moment at last peace in the center of our being.... is in us, through us, and by us the voice of the shepherd. Our shepherd...

What voice do we follow -- is it the shepherd calling? Do we hear the voice of the shepherd saying follow me, that it may not be easy but it is the way?

There is but one authentic voice that will lead us to true joy and peace and happiness....the Good shepherd is calling....do we listen? And even then, by the sheer grace of God, the shepherd patiently waits upon us, pursuing us...calling us even now unto himself to love and keep us...

But thanks be to God the shepherd of that idyllic green pasture and still water will still set this banquet in the very sight of these enemies from who his

sheep are constantly being defended and as we are reminded today in John the old fisherman, who seemed to know a thing or two about sheep, wrote finally in Revelation:

For this reason they, the sheep, are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

And that is a promise of almighty God. And his good shepherd Jesus the Christ.