

The Good Shepherd

On Tuesday I had a bit of a head cold, so before turning in for the night I took some NyQuil to help me sleep. Knowing I was on a timer, I finished my usual bedtime routine quickly which ended with me taking my dog Gracie out one last time before bed. After shutting my eyes, in what felt like just a second later, I was suddenly woken up by the sound of bells jingling in my room. Groggily, I turned over and grabbed my phone to see it was 2:30am. Annoyed and tired, I turned over and tried to fall back asleep, when the bells went off again. I looked over to barely make out my 2-year-old puppy named Gracie sitting at the door like this. **(GRACIE 1)**

You see, I have trained her to ring that set of bells on the door to let me know when she has to use the restroom. I almost always oblige when she does this, but I was so sleepy from the medicine, was not feeling great, and remembered that I had just let her out before bed, so I called for her to come back to sleep and didn't get up. A third time, the bells went off and I finally relented to her constant nagging. This time, however, more time had passed, and it was bright outside. I stepped out of bed and realized why Gracie had tried to get me up last night. Sadly, in a few spots in my room, she had gotten sick. Immediately, a wave of guilt washed over me, and I felt horrible for not listening to her when she asked for help. **(SERMON SLIDE)**

Here at the church, we find ourselves in the 4th Sunday of Easter and continue to marvel at our Savior's resurrection. These past couple of weeks, we have been exploring some of the different reactions that the disciples had to Jesus' overcoming of the grave. Surprisingly, even though they were told of all that was to come, they met the news of his resurrection with doubt and fear. Trusting that their Lord had truly come back from the dead was hard for them to do, despite all that they had seen and experienced. Yet, they came to believe that Jesus had resurrected and went on to share the Good News with the world. Today's passage from John, shifts from sharing how Jesus' followers reacted to his resurrection, and instead narrows in on what the resurrection itself means for them, us, and the world.

This morning, we also are celebrating Earth Care Sunday and renewing our commitment to care for the world that God created. I hope you will join us after worship in Fellowship Hall for our first ever Earth Day Fair, where we will be joined by local non-profit organizations- KindWorks, Harvest Share, and Nourishing Bethesda- and many of our church committees to hear how we can get involved in caring for God's earth and God's people around us. If you want to learn how you can Show Up for Community, then I hope you will come to our fair. Those of you watching this live from home still have plenty of time to make your way to 10301 River Road and take part in the festivities starting at noon.

Given our earth day and earth care focus, it is appropriate that our two scripture passages use the metaphor of a shepherd caring for their flock in order to describe how God loves and cares for us. My hope is that together by studying them these next few minutes, we will see how we are called to care for God's creation as we remember who our Good Shepherd is.

To get us started, let's take a moment to think about this metaphor of the shepherd that arises in both Psalm 23 and John 10. **(SHEPHERD PHOTO)** Many of us are likely familiar with the profession of shepherding, and it is something that comes up time and time again in scripture. Most simply, shepherding was and is a profession where a person watches over a flock and guides them to pastures where they can safely graze. Back in Jesus' time, it was a dangerous job, as you often had to fight off

predators that sought to harm your animals. It was a difficult job, as you had to work long, physical hours. It was an earthly job, as you roamed the fields, mountains, and valleys in search of food and safe harbor for your sheep.

I couldn't help but think about Gracie when thinking about shepherds this week. Obviously, I am not the best shepherd as I neglected her cries for help- but it is an apt comparison for us pet owners to think about our own animals as our flock. They rely on us for food and water. Depend on us to take care of their needs and watch over their health and wellbeing. Over time, the bond grows between us and our pets, and they become an irreplaceable part of our family. That is how the shepherd and flock relationship works too.

In saying that he is the good shepherd in John 10, Jesus is claiming us as his own flock. **(SCRIPTURE)** We heard Jackie share how Jesus is not like a hired hand who will run away at the first sign of trouble. He instead intimately knows us and cares for us. And though his flock has many in it, there are others who are outside of the fold that he seeks to bring into it. All of this was commanded by his Father in heaven. These are beautiful truths and descriptions of how Jesus views each and every one of us.

Seeing as we are still in the Sundays of Easter, it is interesting to note that this proclamation took place before his eventual arrest, death, and resurrection. Jesus in this passage was foreshadowing what was to come by using the metaphor of a shepherd who keeps watch over their flock. Did you catch how Jesus really hit home the point that he was going to die in the passage? He says he will:

(SCRIPTURE 2 with BOLD)

“lay down his life for the sheep” in verse 11,

“and I lay down my life for the sheep” verse 15,

“because I lay down my life in order to take it up again” verse 17

“but I lay it down of my own accord.” and

“I have the power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.” In verse 18

Jesus was clear that he had to give up his own life to save his flock. He did this out of love for us, and did so both knowingly and willingly. Even with this foreshadowing, we learned the past couple of weeks that it was difficult for the disciples to accept this fact and the same might be true for some of us today. One question that I hear quite often surrounding Easter is: why did Jesus have to die? Perhaps the shepherding metaphor can help point us in the right direction...

The relationship between sheep and their shepherd may help us understand this a bit more. This week, I came across a nice description of just how reliant the sheep are on the shepherd. Hear theologian Elizabeth Webb describe it in her own words:

(SLIDE) “A sheep is a particularly vulnerable creature, especially when on its own. Sheep need a leader so as not to wander aimlessly, and will follow their leader even into certain danger. Sheep have no defense against predators except for flocking, yet their instinctive flight response to danger can also

cause panic and scattering. Individual sheep are highly stressed when separated from their flock. Indeed, sheep must be able to see each other in order to graze without agitation, and the loss of that visual contact can lead to further panic and flight. A lost sheep is, if you will, a sitting duck.”

When we look at the Bible as a whole, we see God at work in the world and in people’s lives. From the earliest pages to the end, the authors make it clear that God made this world and called it good, but humans over and over again sin and bring about evil in it. Like sheep, we, as humans, are flawed, vulnerable, and in need of a leader. Knowing this, God sent Jesus to be the Good Shepherd that shows us the way and leads us down the right path. To display just how much Jesus loved us, he was obedient even to the cross. In his dying and rising, he showed that nothing can separate us from the love of God and no power is greater than our Lord’s. This is the Easter story in a nutshell. The good shepherd Jesus had to die to show us the way to eternal life and fulfill all that was promised through centuries.

I appreciate how our lectionary pairs the Good Shepherd passage from John with the familiar Psalm 23. We hear how even long before Jesus’ bodily arrival on earth, the Lord was at work comforting his sheep. **(SCRIPTURE)**

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

For many, the 23rd Psalm is a heart verse that helps bring comfort at various times in life, `but especially when the going gets tough or we have lost our way. Even in the darkest valleys, we need not fear as our Lord is with us. For, it is when something is wrong, when we feel isolated, or are suffering that we need our shepherd most. This is true in our faith and true for all of us shepherds.

My little brother Corey and his fiancé Colleen were Gracie’s primary caretakers Wednesday when she was under the weather. **(GRACIE 2)** After some pureed pumpkin and some chicken and rice she was able to quickly recover from whatever ailed her. Corey said he was happy to care for her and felt so bad for her. He wished there was more he could do to help, but did his best to keep an eye on her and comfort her. If we, as flawed human shepherds can care for and comfort our flock in times of need, how much more will the good shepherd, Jesus, be there for us when the going gets rough?

The Good News today is that our good shepherd doesn’t take any breaks. Our good shepherd doesn’t get sick or get tired. Our good shepherd doesn’t get annoyed when we ring the bell, asking for

help over and over again. Jesus is there for us in all times and seasons, but especially when we need him most.

On this Earth Care Sunday as we are reminded of how much we are loved by our Lord and why he came down to this earth for us, we are called to share that love with the world and extend that love to others. Maybe there is a step that we can take this week to start caring for the world and others who are in need. We are all part of Jesus' flock and together we can bring about God's love more fully in this good earth we inhabit.

I'd like to end by sharing a verse we came across in our Bible Study this week. It was another shepherding metaphor from scripture, but in the form of a parable that spoke to how Jesus views us:

(Matthew 18:12) "What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?"

Jesus will not leave us when we are lost or feeling abandoned. He is our Lord, our good shepherd, that leaves the 99 to find us and bring us back into the fold. How might we trust in our Good Shepherd this week and this season as we seek to Show Up for Community? Christ is Risen, He is risen indeed. Alleluia, Amen.





