

Sunday, April 21, 2024
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year B)

Psalm 23; John 10.11-18

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1202996367523691>

(Sermon begins at about 23:30)

“The Good Shepherd’s Promise”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Here at the mid-point of Eastertide, we make a transition. Leaving behind the accounts of Christ’s post-resurrection appearances and shifting our focus to some of Jesus’ teachings about what the reality of his resurrection means to us in our relationship with him and with God. We start off these teachings with some of the best known and most beloved scripture readings depicting that relationship: images of Christ as the Good Shepherd. Primarily the 23rd Psalm and a portion of Jesus’ declaration of himself as the Good Shepherd from the Gospel according to John.

The 23rd Psalm is one of the most well-known, if not THE most well-known of the Psalms. We hear this Psalm several times a year in Sunday worship, as well as it being the most commonly used Psalm at funerals. Largely because it provides words of comfort, as well as assurance of the love, mercy, and goodness of our Lord who shepherds us in life, as well as in death. Of course, being written prior to the birth of Jesus, the Lord who is identified as shepherd in the 23rd Psalm is a reference to God and not to Jesus Christ per se. Although, in our Christian tradition and with our understanding of the trinitarian nature of God, we are able to expand our interpretation of this image of the Old Testament God to include Jesus.

Even for Old Testament Jews, this image of the “The Lord is my shepherd” was not limited to God alone. Many of the great prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah all describe the long-awaited and promised messiah as a shepherd. So, to Jesus’ audience in first century Palestine, the image of shepherd would have been readily understood to be applicable to God or God’s anointed, the Messiah, depending on context. Which makes Jesus’ statement in John’s Gospel particularly radical: “I am the good shepherd.” Jesus’ original audience would have noticed the obvious allusion to their Hebrew scripture—seeing direct references to the 23rd Psalm, as well as to various other prophetic writings. Jesus’ statement, “I am the good shepherd” would also have brought to mind another famous image in their history: Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush. When Moses asks God for his name, he responds “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3.13). God becoming known as the great “I AM.” So when Jesus utters those words, “I am the good shepherd,” he is combining two popular images of God and making them a statement of his own identity. Revealing his shared identity with God who is both the good shepherd and the great “I AM.” Controversial to say the least.

Of course, for us, this self-identification with God is par for the course. After all, for Christians, what we know about God and particularly our relationship with God is precisely due to Jesus being God in the flesh.

As we further explore the image of Jesus as the good shepherd, particularly in light of the resurrection and what this image says about our relationship with God, we need to take a step back. Our Gospel passage designated for today is the latter half of a larger discourse Jesus delivers about being the good shepherd. The statement Jesus makes right before today's passage really places this image of him as the good shepherd in the context of relationship with us post-resurrection—of what the resurrection means for us in our relationship with him and with God. Prior to today's passage, Jesus says "I came that they [referring to his sheep] may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10.10b). A clear reference to the primary purpose for Jesus' life and ministry. And in light of the Easter event, a pretty clear statement of what the resurrection was about. To provide us with an abundant life. Now we're not talking about an abundant life in terms of wealth and riches. But more so, a life that is filled with the abundance of God's love and mercy, God's compassion and forgiveness. As well as so many other manifestation of God' presence in our lives, such as guidance and inspiration, God's strength, healing, comfort, and so on.

All these attributes of the good shepherd and his relationship with us are wrapped up in the Jesus' statement, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." Further emphasizing the depth of relationship we have with Christ. That his relationship with us, our relationship with him, is as deep and broad as Christ's relationship with God. And the extent of what he is willing to do for us and for the sake of our relationship? The extent he is willing to go to as proof of that relationship? As proof of how much he loves us? That is in the next verse: "And I lay down my life for the sheep." Literally. That is what Christ's Passion was about. That is what his resurrection was about. That he laid down his life to provide us with the opportunity for new and eternal life with him. That is the epitome of abundant life that he provides us. All of which is achieved through Christ's resurrection. All of this is a promise Christ, as our good shepherd, makes to us, as a way of proving how much he loves us. Proof of how much God loves us. And just as the sheep willingly follow their shepherd, we follow our shepherd where he lovingly leads us. Into the ultimate expression of relationship with Christ and with our God. The promise of new and eternal life in his heavenly realm.

As many of you know, I was away this past week to attend a family funeral. The funeral for my Aunt Carol, wife of my father's brother. While at the visitation the evening before the funeral, I was talking with my Uncle Steve. He told me a story that perfectly exemplifies what it means to live into the promise of new life that we receive through Our Lord's resurrection.

By way of background, Carol's physical health had been declining for some time. In addition, she was beginning to show signs of dementia. Early in March, Steve made the painful decision to move Carol into a care facility. Carol's decline continued, and it became apparent that the end was rapidly approaching.

On Easter Day, Steve went to the care facility to visit Carol before heading to church. He walked into her room and asked her what day this was, thinking that she may not even know what day of the week it was. She immediately responded, "It's Easter." Steve then asked her what that means. Without even taking time to ponder the question, she responded, "It means we will go to heaven." As my cousin Darin later noted, "Mom had confidence in her place in heaven."

Even in her weakened and declining state, Carol not only knew that it was Easter, but also the significance of that day. Not just for her, but for all of us. A journey we will all make when our lives come to an end. A journey that she would be making in less than two weeks. That even as her body and her mind were failing her, her faith and her spirit were not failing her. If anything, they were as strong as ever. That even in her decline, it was her faith and her spirit that supported her and helped prepare her for what she knew was to come.

This is faithful and abundant living. This is what the Psalmist was talking about when he wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd." This is what Jesus was talking about when he said "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." This is what Jesus meant when he said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." This is what it meant when Jesus said, "I lay down my life for the sheep." This is what it means to be people of faith. Living every moment of our lives, right up to the end of our earthly journey, in the certainty of who we are and whose we are. Living with the assurance that Christ is our good shepherd. Willingly following where the good shepherd leads. Living into deeper and abiding relationship with our Lord. Living into the hope of the resurrection. Living with the absolute and unwavering certainty of that Easter promise: "we are going to heaven."

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!