

Fourth Sunday of Easter (B)
April 21, 2024
Zion Lutheran Church at 9:00 am
Emmanuel Lutheran Church at 10:30 am

RCL Texts: Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1st Jon 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord, Savior, and brother – Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

The appointed texts for the Fourth Sunday after Easter are always about Jesus being the Good Shepherd, which is why the unofficial title of this day is “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The image of a shepherd might be hidden to those who are born and raised in a city. But in agricultural areas like ours, the image of a shepherd is more accessible.

As I have observed many who raise cattle in our community, I get a better understanding myself of the good shepherd. I know great care, time, money, and dedication are invested during calving season and making sure that the herd is protected and healthy, because the future livelihoods of so many relate to the future of those cattle. I do hear your stories about the measures many of you take to save a struggling calf. In this way, we get some understanding when Jesus says that he lays his life down for his sheep.

When we think about Jesus giving his life for us, our minds usually turn first, and sometimes only, to his crucifixion. Jesus' work on the cross is the most obvious way that he laid down his life for us, but it is not the only way. Jesus' entire incarnation as the Word of God made flesh, his being born to this earthly life, his teaching, preaching, healing, his suffering and death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his sending of the Holy Spirit, are all ways that Jesus laid down and continues to lay down his life for us.

Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God made flesh. God, who made every intricate working of a universe so vast that we, even with all our advanced knowledge, still cannot fully comprehend it, became one with us in Jesus Christ. God in Jesus chose to have his life and future forever linked with ours. In Jesus, God gave up freedom – freedom from the burden of us and our sins and freedom to be God without all our shortcomings. In Jesus, God chose a future with us over every wonder of creation. Why? Because for some reason beyond human understanding, God loves us with a love stronger than death. God in Jesus forever chooses us and willingly lives and dies as our shepherd rather than have us wander forever lost.

In John's Gospel, more than any other, we see that Jesus gave his life by choice. Jesus clearly states that he lays down his life; it is not taken from him. For

those of you who were here on Good Friday, who heard from Jesus' passion story according to John, Pilate is almost desperate to release Jesus. It is Jesus, himself, who freely accepts the cross so that he can draw all people to himself.

We so very much need to remember that this is Jesus choosing and acting and not us. The sheep do not find the shepherd; they cannot find the shepherd, which is the reason why they need a shepherd in the first place. The shepherd goes out, finds them, and calls them so that they hear his voice. But how do the sheep know the shepherd's voice? It is only through the continual presence of the shepherd as part of the life of the sheep. It is through the presence of the shepherd that even wandering sheep can recognize the shepherd's voice.

We are given tangible examples of this in John's Gospel in the verses before and after today's reading. The context of Jesus talking about himself as the Good Shepherd is in response to the religious leaders investigating Jesus healing the man born blind. The text makes it clear that Jesus saw and found the blind man, and not the other way around. The blind man did not even ask for healing. Jesus simply gave it to him because he needed it. And because Jesus healed him by putting mud and spit in his eyes and then telling him to go and wash his eyes, the blind man did not even get to see Jesus until Jesus went and found him again and began speaking to him.

After today's Gospel reading in chapter eleven, we hear the story of Lazarus. Lazarus, who was dead, certainly did not go searching for Jesus. Jesus came and spoke to him in the grave. Jesus' voice as the Word of God made flesh was so full of light, life, and love that even the ears of the dead Lazarus could hear and respond. And ultimately, through his work on the cross, Jesus does not simply come to the grave, but goes into the grave with us, speaking words of life that even death cannot ignore.

Last week there was a community ecumenical service where the speaker focused on how much we need a savior, which is most certainly true. But as is usual with American revivalism of the last century and a half, it was presented that our needing a savior is ultimately ours to choose or ignore. And you can certainly string together unrelated and out of context verses from the Bible to make it sound Biblical. "If you just ask Jesus. If you ask Jesus into your heart. If you pray this sinners' prayer...If you... If you... ... If you... After all, Jesus is providing all this freely. What a bargain. But you better act, now, this deal will eventually run out. And Jesus needs is to be asked because Jesus gave us free will and would never presume to insert himself into our lives without our acceptance."

I can never figure out where that last popular, pious, but basically un-Biblical idea comes from. Thanks be to God that in Jesus and by the power of the Holy

Spirit God's grace comes often without our cooperation or consent, or else we would never let it come. We need to stop seeing salvation as a bargain sale that we need to go out and acquire because it is free and live in the breath of life that God breathes into us, not because we asked for it in the right way, but simply because we need it and in God's endless love in Jesus Christ God provides what we need – not what we deserve, not what we accept, but what we need!

Seeing Jesus as the Good Shepherd means recognizing that the work of salvation is purely from God and that it takes all of God's entire being as revealed to us in Jesus. Jesus just didn't come to earth, suffer for a few hours on the cross, and go back to Heaven hoping that we all would work it out for ourselves by saying the right prayers and having the correct theology. Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, continues to search us out as lost sheep, continually calls to us with a familiar voice when we are lost, and comes to speak to us even in the silence of the grave.

Jesus is God's all-in investment in us. Jesus is God's answer to human sin and evil; and, it is not an answer of retribution or of divine magic of waving a hand to make everything right, but of God joining us in the fear, danger, and death of human sin in which we are lost, speaking new life in us so that these things are not the end of our story. In short, Jesus is God getting divine hands dirty with the sin

and death of our world and in our individual lives for no greater return on God's part other than divine love for us.

We are reminded in our second reading from today from 1st John, not to be confused with the Gospel of John, is that what Jesus did for us we are now free to do for each other and for the world. This is where our cooperation and choice comes in. We are told not to simply love with words, but with truth and action, which is what Jesus is as the Word of God made flesh – truth and action let loose in our sinful world. We can't be the voice of the shepherd, but we can be the body of the shepherd in action among us and our community. We can become bodies and feet on the ground, inviting others to hear the shepherd, not through threats, coercion and evangelizing techniques of the mouth that only serve to make us feel superior and do nothing to bring Christ to those who need Christ the most, but through being the embodiment of Christ's love as we are empowered through the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the Twenty-third Psalm is one of the most famous and favorite parts of the Bible for many. The last line of this psalm is usually translated as something like "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." "...goodness and mercy shall follow me..." The Hebrew word that usually is translated as "follow" also means to

intensely pursue or to chase down. "...goodness and mercy shall chase me down..."

It does not have the same poetic flow, but this is what it means to have a good shepherd – a shepherd who chases us down with goodness and mercy simply because the sheep need it and the shepherd will do anything in love for the sheep. Having been so chased down, may we begin to join the chase until goodness and mercy catches all those to whom our shepherd calls. Amen.