

Main Topic: Trusting the Good Shepherd

Sub Topic: Following the Good Shepherd brings abundance and transformation.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/-ZSkxM5hgBQ>

Today we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday. As we think about what this means, I like how a fellow Episcopal priest expressed his thoughts when he wrote, “Jesus the Good Shepherd isn’t a Precious Moments painting or collectible, however sweet that may feel or seem. Love — love enough to lay down one’s life and take it back up again — isn’t only sweet, and it isn’t only a moment. It’s earthy and it gets dirty” (end of quote).¹ His point rings true because the Good Shepherd knows us as we are and meets us where we live. His care for us “*always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.*”² And what makes this so unique is that his love has most often been expended upon the least deserving.

We can see something of this if we will familiarize ourselves with the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. In the small but enriching book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, author Phillip Keller, who was himself a shepherd, tells of the difficulties involved with caring for the temperamental nature of sheep. For example, sheep do not easily lie down. In fact, “It is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met. Owing to their timidity, they refuse to lie down unless they are free of fear, tension, aggravation, and hunger.”³ He also went on to say that no other class of livestock requires more careful handling and more detailed attention than do sheep. You get a glimpse of this in the way Jesus carefully handled his critics.

¹ Joseph Peters-Mathews Sermons that Work 2018

² 1 Corinthians 13:7

³ Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, page citation lost.

When Jesus first announced, ***“I am the good shepherd,”***⁴ it raised controversy among those who heard him. ***“Many of them said, ‘He has a demon and is mad; why listen to him?’ Others said, ‘These are not the saying of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’”***⁵ So let’s consider the question, ***“Why listen to him?”*** After all, trust does not come easily to any of us. There are many other voices competing for our attention, many of those voice have a dim view of faith, and some, at worst, are quite skeptical. Listening to the strife and contention on major networks and news media can easily lead a person to frustration, despair, and doubt.

Its dynamic reminds me of the story about a dog that wandered out onto a football field in the middle of half-time. The dog happened to be responsive to everyone who whistled for him. When fans from both sides of the field began whistling to him, the dog, in confusion, began running back and forth from one sideline to the other. Eventually, out of sheer exhaustion, the dog lay down. Then someone carefully came out on the field to retrieve him, so the second half of the game could begin.

I wonder if that is not an appropriate picture for us when we get to hear so many conflicting voices. Our New Testament story from the Book of Acts abounds with such examples of those who would attempt to turn people away from faith in Jesus so that they would turn their trust over to them instead. All these other voices competing for our attention do not really know us, neither do they want to know us. Only one voice calls us each by name. Only one has loved us enough to lay down his life for us. It is his light that still shines in the midst of the darkness, calling out to us, saying, ***“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”***⁶

⁴ John 10:11

⁵ John 10:20-21

⁶ Matthew 11:28-29

The Good Shepherd is the one who said, ***“I know my sheep and my own sheep know me.”***⁷ He knows us because he came and dwelt among us and walked in our shoes. He identified with all of our weaknesses and struggles. He was “tempted in every way that we are, yet without sin.”⁸ That is why we can relate to him as a brother and trust him as our Shepherd and friend.

I recently came across an article that illustrated how attractive this relationship could be. It came to my attention from a person writing about a new sensational hit video game called “PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds.” Now, I personally don’t play video games, but the article grabbed my attention when the writer described how it became so popular. The video game places a hundred players on a virtual island to compete until one player remains. Whenever a player eliminates you from the contest, you can continue to watch through that player’s vantage point. As one journalist noted, “When you step into another player’s shoes and inhabit their point of view, the emotional register . . . shifts from self-preservation to . . . communal solidarity. . . . You begin to feel invested in the stranger who, not too long ago, did you in.”⁹

When I thought about this, I began to see that this is similar to what Jesus did for us. The Bible tells us ***that “When we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”***¹⁰ It is because our Good Shepherd was willing to put himself in our place, standing between us and the snarling, bloodthirsty teeth of evil. Then we can begin to have a different vantage point, one that gives us the ability ***“to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.”***¹¹

So let me ask you. In light of today’s message, can you hear the Good Shepherd is beckoning you? Are you willing to listen to his voice and follow where he leads? He is inviting you to get close. To come to

⁷ John 10:14

⁸ Hebrews 4:15

⁹ Our Daily Bread, April 23, 2021, “Seeing with New Eyes” by Winn Collier

¹⁰ Romans 5:8

¹¹ Ephesians 3:18-19

him and trust him, even when it requires following him through death's dark valley.

Will you follow? Will you go where he calls? Will you let him love you? Will you let him carry you when you're wounded and heal your weary soul?

“Surely his goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”¹² Amen.

Reflection Questions

- Psalm 23 declares that the Lord, our Shepherd, wants to meet all of our needs and lovingly care for us. When have you found yourself trusting – or not trusting – in his care?
- Can you describe a time of danger or darkness in your life when you felt the shepherding love of God reaching out to you?
- Since Jesus laid down his life for us, what might you need to “lay down” in your life to bring about the kind of relationship of love and trust described in our readings today?

¹² Psalm 23:6