

Psalm 23

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Second Lesson A Reading from The Epistle of John 1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

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. 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.

- Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's People
- *Thanks be to God*

The Gospel according to John 10:11-18

Glory to you Lord Christ

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 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. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord,

Praise to you, Lord Christ

Sermon

“Of Sheep and Shepherds”

Br. Finn Coll, AF

I love the 23rd Psalm.

The pastoral imagery, the intimate relationship with God, the assurances of protection and nurture - the Lord really is my shepherd - all of it warms my heart.

But I also kinda giggle at the last verse.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

I know, I know.

It doesn't exactly make for knee-slapping comedy, but hear me out.

The word ‘follow’ in the Hebrew text of this Psalm is ‘yirdepuni’. It’s the only time this form of the word ‘follow’ shows up in the whole Bible, and it carries with it the meaning of hunting, tracking, pursuing, like a Divine Bloodhound or a Sacred Labrador.

“Surely your goodness and mercy shall chase my sorry butt down, no matter how many times I wander off like an idiot sheep, hellbent on destroying itself for sheer stupidity.”

Yeah, that sounds about right.

So Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep and loves them and lays down his life for them and calls them by name and keeps them healthy and safe. And we’re the sheep. Got it. Makes sense. And it feels good too, doesn’t it?

I always loved those paintings of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. You know the ones - pale skin, almost-blond hair, blue eyes, a placid smile, carrying a lamb over his shoulders. There was at least one in every church I ever saw in my youth. They gave me a sense of

peace, of safety. I could imagine being lifted onto those shoulders and carried to the greenest pastures and coolest waters.

And that kind of imagery has its place in Christian teaching, for sure... but I'm not going to be able to preach that for you today.

Because here's the deal: We're not supposed to be sheep for life! I mean yes - I'm a willful, stubborn, petulant child of God, prone to boneheaded displays of fallibility that have **got** to exasperate the Most High on a regular basis.

And Jesus Christ truly **is** the Good Shepherd who will chase after me in my woolly-headed escapades and drag me back into the sheepfold by my hind legs, no matter how much I squirm and bleat. He will unfailingly rescue me from the proverbial wolves, thornbushes, and thieves - and even more, from my own sheepish misdeeds - for which I am eternally grateful.

But it is an absolute travesty that so many Christian teachers decide to stop there. Yes, it gives me a nice warm, confident, 'saved' feeling - but it barely scratches the surface of the rich, deep, formative mystery that is the Gospel of Christ!

Today, we have a wonderful opportunity to delve deeper, provided to us by the appointed Bible readings, particularly the Gospel of John and the Epistle - also of John. Most scholars agree that these two books were written by the same person or people, which is tremendously helpful to us because it means we can read them together, as parts of a broader look at the spirituality of John's community.

Think about how Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd in the Gospel lesson: lays down his life, deeply loves those under his care, knows us and is known by us... and then look at how John describes how we are to live as Children of God: to lay down our whole lives for each other, to love one another purely and completely, to 'abide' in Jesus and one another, being known...

Do you see what we're getting at here?

I believe John is saying that just as Jesus was the Good Shepherd to the world during his earthly life, so now **we** are to be good shepherds in the same way!

I'm willing to admit to you that that sounds hard - and a little scary. A good shepherd is willing to lay down their life for those in their care. And that's not just talking about martyrdom, y'know - if it were just a reference to giving up my physical life that'd actually be easier - I'd be dead at the end of it, right?

But what Jesus is saying here is that a good shepherd is willing to lay down their **WHOLE** life - their desires, their preferences, their plans, their dreams, their riches, their possessions, their status - everything - and then keep following him past the loss of all that. I don't know about you, but that's the hardest thing anyone's ever asked me to do! And if I'm **completely** honest, I don't know that I'd have the strength to fully commit to it when asked! In truth, knowing what I know about the sheepish stupidities of humanity in general and me in particular - does it even seem... possible?

Well, that's the Good News.
Jesus has made it possible.

Some of you might remember that the last time I got to speak to you I preached on St. Mark's Passion - specifically that sacred, universe-altering moment of Jesus' death when the enormous, thick curtain in the Temple was torn in half and the Presence of the God who is Love poured out - and would never again be contained. I told you then and I'll tell you now: The very Creator of the Universe has chosen to dwell with you - not in churches or books, but with you and IN you, if you'll let Them.

John reminded us today that God can abide in us and us in Them, meaning that Love can be part of the very fabric of our being.

Jesus showed us just how powerfully he loves us, in laying down his divine life. The Psalmist assures us that no matter what, God's goodness and mercy are chasing us down every moment of every day, pursuing us in order to love and bless us more and more.

All these assurances and so many more point to a truth of the Gospel:

As Christ has loved, so we can love.
As Christ has lived, so we can live.
As Christ once was embodied in human flesh, so we are now his Blessed Body, given the joyful task of Loving the broken world back together.
We are invited and empowered to be the Jesus that the world needs.

So go into your life as both Sheep and Shepherd, knowing that the God-Who-Is-Love is with you, now and always. **Amen.**

Nicene Creed

(BCP p.358)

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,

and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. **Amen.**

Prayers of the People for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

*After this and every petition, the leader says **Lord, hear us.***

***People** Lord, graciously hear us.*

Gathered in the care of the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep, let us pray to God who knows our every need.

For the holy churches in every place, and for the unity of all.
Lord, hear us.
People Lord, graciously hear us.

For this parish family of St. Martin's, that we will faithfully bear witness to the risen Christ in word and deed.
Lord, hear us.
People Lord, graciously hear us.

For this holy assembly and for all who gather in the name of the risen Christ.
Lord, hear us.
People Lord, graciously hear us.

For Michael our Presiding Bishop, Diana our Bishop, for the clergy, deacons, chaplains, and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.
Lord, hear us.
People Lord, graciously hear us.

For the world and its leaders, our nation and its people.
Lord, hear us.
People Lord, graciously hear us.

For all those in danger and need, the sick and the suffering, the strayed and the lost.

Lord, hear us.

People *Lord, graciously hear us.*

For those who walk in death's dark valley, that they may rest in the peace of Christ, especially Tina Hadley and the victims of violence and disease

Lord, hear us.

People *Lord, graciously hear us.*

For ourselves, our families, and those we love, especially those on our prayer list, and those we name, silently or aloud

Lord, hear us.

People *Lord, graciously hear us.*

Remembering the blessed Virgin Mary, St. Martin, and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ.

To you, O Lord.

Celebrant

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, for you soothe our head with oil and fill our cup with wine: Hear the prayers we offer for every need, and revive us with your Holy Spirit. Glory to you for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. **Amen.**

Absolution

Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us all our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for St. Martin's

God of Love,

open our eyes and ears to perceive you at work
in creation, the church, and our parish.

Fill our hearts with your love
that we may reach out in love to others.

Stir up our imagination with your Holy Spirit
that we may find new ways to live into life with you.

Give us a vision of your mission
that we may share your love and your spirit
in all the places where we work and play and worship you.
In Jesus' holy name, **Amen.**

Blessings

Dismissal:

Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord, Alleluia, Alleluia.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia, Alleluia

