

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT.
on 4 Easter, April 25, 2021 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Acts 4:5-12. Psalm 23. 1 John 3:16-24. John 10:11-18

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In this morning's Gospel, Jesus gives his disciples...and gives us... an image, an analogy, a metaphor, a lens through which we can see how the Spirit of the Risen Jesus continues to be with us and guide us.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Throughout the Bible, this image of God as the good shepherd of his people is a common theme. Shepherds were part of everyday life in Israel, so everyone recognized that without the care and guidance of a shepherd, sheep would starve, get lost, be killed. Their life depended on following the nurturing and protective guidance of their shepherd.

Many years ago, an art historian taught me that the earliest Christian drawings and paintings were of Jesus carrying a sheep over his shoulders. This was the most precious and helpful image of God and Jesus for the early Christians. It was the clearest expression of how they experienced God's relationship with them and their relationship with God.

I wonder, would it be helpful for you to think of yourself and your life as being carried or guided by your good shepherd, Jesus, who always loves you and cares about you and is walking with you moment by moment?

Of course, every analogy or image has its limitations, so Jesus is careful to say I am the GOOD shepherd. Both Jesus and his audience knew there were some bad shepherds who were just hired hands. They only cared about making money. They did not really care about the sheep, didn't even know the names of the sheep. If a wolf or a predator or big problem came along, those day laborer shepherds would simply run away to save their own lives. They didn't feel any personal connection or responsibility to stay with and care for the sheep in difficult times.

As Jesus pointed out, self-centered, money focused, uncaring shepherds have been a problem throughout human history. Can you think of some untrustworthy shepherds in this generation?

We have all seen too many religious and political and corporate business leaders who are more interested in making money for themselves than in caring about the real needs of people they claim to serve. We as a nation and world are beginning to recognize that many of the institutions and leaders we thought would care for us, are really false, unreliable shepherds who only care about the money they make and do not really care about people or the planet or the Creator.

By contrast, Jesus said, I am the good shepherd. You have seen by my actions that I really care about you and about people in need around me. I'm willing to lay down my life, to die, out of love for you, for the whole human race, for the whole universe.

Jesus spoke this way to prepare his disciples for the crisis they would experience after he was crucified. He wanted his disciples... and all of us... to know that on Good Friday, and in the Good Friday moments of our lives, it will look and feel like Jesus is abandoning his sheep, abandoning us, by dying or not acting as we wish he would act.

In those times, Jesus invites us to remember that God is always at work at deeper levels that we can recognize, working for the good of all God's creation. Christ's self-sacrificing death and Resurrection showed his disciples, showed us... and shows the world... that death is not the end. Evil and violence never have the last word in God's universe. God's love and just mercy is deeper and stronger than the worst evils of leaders and institutions, or nations, technology and terrorists. Christ's resurrection demonstrates that God will ...eventually... bring new life out of dead ends, open up new possibilities when situations seem hopeless. The Jesus who rose from the dead continues, as he promised, to send his Holy Spirit to be with us always, to guide us in and through all circumstances, like a Good Shepherd.

In today's epistle, John describes another dimension of the image of a good shepherd. John writes: "We know love by this, that Jesus 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...with the love and power of Holy Spirit that God has placed within us."

You see, God, our good shepherd, created us all to be good shepherds for others. Out of love, Jesus laid down his life for us, and sent us to lay down our lives out of love for our neighbors in need. God wants to transform the brokenness of this world by raising up ordinary people who will become examples, leaders and raise up organizations and institutions, who will be genuine good shepherds, who care for their neighbors in need more than they care about getting rich and consuming more goods and toys for themselves.

I wonder, who is the flock, who are the people God has called you to care for in love? Of course, our families and close friends are part of the flock God sent us to care for. We also have neighbors, people we work with, people we meet in stores and in business dealings, on the phone and through social media, as well as on the streets. These are all part of our flock.

There are also people in need we see in the news, both locally and around the world. And there are invisible people in our communities and nation which we do not see, but who are also in need of care.

The list of people in need can feel overwhelming. Of course, we can't care for everyone. We all have limitations of time, energy, skills, resources. Yet, God gives each of us a little flock, a specific group of people we are to care for as good shepherds.

This past week, the whole world saw how 17 year-old Darnella Frazier interrupted her visit to a store in Minneapolis because she saw a person in need. She took a video of the interaction between a policeman and George Floyd. Like a good shepherd, she pleaded with the policeman to stop and help a man who was not able to breathe. She showed us all how crucially important one person can be, in the course of their ordinary day, to care for a neighbor she did not know, but who was in need. It was not something she planned. Somehow God's Spirit made her aware in the moment of the need, stirred up her compassion and gave her both the guidance and will to act...and she said yes to the guidance. That simple act has rippled out to have more impact for good than she could have imagined.

On a more ordinary scale, during this pandemic year, I have been deeply moved by the way people in this congregation have informally stayed in touch with and helped each other, as well as reaching out to care for people in need outside this congregation. Jesus is seeking to bring his transforming love into American society at this time of great need and challenge through ordinary people like us, who will follow the guidance of God's Spirit to speak and act as good shepherds for others.

We know from experience, that we can burn ourselves out, from trying to do more than we can or should do. Jesus taught us that he only did and said what his heavenly Father told him to do and say. At times, with God's guidance, Jesus said "no" to helping people. He lived within his God-given limits. Jesus will not burn us out in caring for others, IF we listen for God's guidance. We may burn ourselves out if we act merely out of guilt or eagerness to please others or fear of saying no when we have reached our limit.

The key to sustaining our lives as good shepherds for others is listening for and following the voice of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus who lives inside each of us. As we allow Jesus to be our Good shepherd, moment by moment, the Spirit of Jesus will show us when and how to care of our neighbors. Of course, we will not ever be perfect in listening to and following Christ our good shepherd. It is a lifetime journey of continually learning from our faithfulness and failures, with God's help. And there is an extraordinarily deep joy and fulfillment that comes to us as we experience Jesus shepherding us and showing us how to be good shepherd for others.

In closing, please take out your Scripture insert so we can look briefly at the familiar Psalm 23. We often hear this Psalm at funerals, perhaps because it speaks of the valley of the shadow of death. Actually, this Psalm is about how to live our daily lives.

Verse 1 says: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want."
I find another translation helpful: "Because the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything that I need." When I know my needs are cared for by God, then I am free to care for the needs of others without fear of not having enough myself.

It may sound like a pious illusion to think of God providing everything that we need. Yet, I have listened to many people who have had debilitating illnesses, been in prison, lived in extreme poverty, been abused and treated unjustly...and yet, they have described their experiences of a deep awareness that God is and always has been with them, caring for them, making sure they have what they need...not necessarily what they would want or prefer...but providing for their needs every day, in ways beyond what they could imagine.

In what ways have you experienced God guiding you like a good shepherd, providing for your needs, during the many challenges of this past year and over your lifetime?

I invite you to take the insert home with you and read Psalm 23 each day this week. As you read, ask questions like:

What might God want to say to me today through this Psalm?

What kind of shepherding do I need from God right now?

How might the Spirit of Jesus be inviting me to act as a loving shepherd for other people today and at this time in my life?

Let's close our eyes and take a few moments of silence to listen to Christ's Spirit within us...

What might God be saying to you today through the images of Jesus as your good shepherd and your call to be a good shepherd for others?