

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany ~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía
Hempstead, New York
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Fourth Sunday of Easter B – April 25, 2021

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

*Christ is risen, Alleluia! C: **He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!***

My mother was diagnosed with lymphoma, a cancer that attacked the lymph system throughout her body, toward the end of her earthly life. My brother and I were blessed to have been able to have her admitted to a home hospice program so she could stay in her apartment. Our father had died two years earlier.

Hospice care was a blessing because both my brother and I were working, so we needed to have someone be with her until we returned from work, each taking our turn.

That “someone” was to be a home health care aide. Of course, like anything else in life that involves personal care, we had to work with different people until we found someone whose skills, temperament and attitudes meshed with our needs. And that took quite a bit of time.

We relied on Celia for several months, but we found that we had to tell her that, when she went down the hall from Mom’s apartment to do the laundry, she shouldn’t stay in the laundry room on her cell phone for the whole length of the washing and drying – Mom might need her in the interim. And then we had to prohibit her from taking that cell phone into the bathroom and answering it when she was helping Mom with her shower, because it wasn’t safe. Other, similar situations also occurred.

Celia went on vacation for several weeks, and then we connected with Jane. This was a world of difference. Jane cared for Mom as lovingly as if she were **her own** mother. So, we made the change permanent.

Then my brother’s and my schedules changed so that we needed time to be away from Mom’s apartment during the days on the weekends. So then Anna arrived. Again, the care she provided was as attentive and loving as if she were caring for her own mother.

We experienced with Jane and Anna, on the one hand and Celia on the other, the difference between the Good Shepherd and the hired hand. Of course, neither Jane

nor Anna had to lay down her life for Mom, thank goodness, so their care was not exactly equivalent to the care that Jesus the good shepherd provides us. But in our hearts and minds, it came close.

You know, it may not be easy for us to fully appreciate the significance of the good shepherd metaphor because we haven't known or lived around shepherds – we haven't seen them at work or heard about their responsibilities. We probably haven't had much to do with sheep either, except maybe in petting zoos.

But my family's experience with caretakers for our mother brought home for me the dedication of the personal attendant whose dedicated care is necessary for the well-being of the one being cared for – like the shepherd's care is necessary for the well-being of a flock of sheep.

The biblical metaphor of the shepherd to care for God's people is traditional. Abraham was the keeper of great flocks (Genesis 13:2). Moses was tending his father-in-law's flocks when God called him to lead the chosen people out of Egypt (Exodus 3:1-12). David was just a boy shepherding his family's flocks when Samuel anointed him to be the future king of God's people (1 Samuel 16:11-13). Isaiah said that the Messiah would feed his flock like a shepherd (40:11) and later, he told the people that, without a shepherd, they were helpless (Isa. 53:6). Ezekiel denounced the leaders who didn't care for the people, calling them bad shepherds (Ez. 34:11, 23-24). And, in addition to the 23rd Psalm which we recited today, the 49th Psalm speaks of leaders of the people as shepherds.

Jesus carried the metaphor forward in describing his relationship to us. And he truly **was** the most dedicated of shepherds because he **did** give his life for us. In fact, as John describes his assurance, he would lay down his life in order to take it up again (10:17).

We certainly have had the experience of “hired hands” that haven't properly care for us. We have experienced the leadership in this country, since before it **was** a country that put the liberty and rights – even the lives – of lighter-skinned people above those of others. That is a tradition imported from Europe that we have honored more or less openly for hundreds of years, and that may be being slowly rejected at long last.

We have had leaders who ignored the teachings of science about the effects of our lifestyles upon the health and sustainability of our world, such that we now are at the brink of glacial melt that will flood many countries that are at sea level, rendering millions of people as refugees.

And our leadership in the recent past, in the face of our nation's history and tradition as one established by immigrants has rejected the arrival of immigrants from countries where they are subjected to violence, poverty and death. But John asks us, "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?" (1 John 3:17.)"

In the last year, we also have experienced the leadership of people who chose to ignore scientific truth in favor of personal freedom and economic development in the face of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, killing hundreds of thousands of people. It appears that we **may** be approaching control of the virus in this country, **if** people will continue to receive the vaccination. But it's reported that that is a big "if," since many people do not intend to take the vaccine. And the recent reports from India reflect a disaster that they may not be able to control, with the lack of oxygen and medication. Just this morning I heard that an oxygen tank exploded in the COVID unit of an Indian hospital and over 100 people were killed.

So what is our response? Do we throw up our hands and give up? That approach is certainly not a tenet of our faith. As John instructs, Jesus Christ "laid down his life for us --- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. (1 John 3:16.) It isn't even the case that, to address so many of the troubles of our day, giving up our lives is necessary. We simply must learn to live together, caring for one another as shepherds, as if the others in our world were our beloved mothers.

The end that Jesus foresees in laying down his life is to achieve one flock, with sheep from the fold of the tribes of Israel and "other sheep that do not belong to this fold" (John 10:16). This bringing together of various folds into one flock of sheep that know his voice.

This is our calling. We are to love humanity into one great flock of the Good Shepherd's sheep. None of us is more deserving of being well cared for than others. And none of us is entitled to be taken care of, without returning that care to others. "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3:18.)

Each of us has the presence and protection of the Good Shepherd in our lives. God calls each of us to share the benefits of that sublime care-taking, to stop sitting around waiting for someone to serve us, and to get up and serve the world.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen