

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**

**“The Shepherd and Guardian of Your Souls” (1 Peter 2:24-25)**

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today is one of my favorite Sunday’s of the year, Good Shepherd Sunday, when we are reminded that the Lord is our Shepherd—as we prayed in the collect for today, Jesus Christ “is the good shepherd of your people” (*The Book of Common Prayer* 225), which includes you. As we read every year on this Sunday, the most famous psalm in scripture, Psalm 23, the Lord your Shepherd provides for you when you are hungry and broke, cares for you when nobody else seems to, guides you when you are lost and have no clue where you are or where you are going or thought you were going, protects you from dangerous people and dangerous circumstances, revives your soul when you feel dead inside, is right by your side when you walk through the dark valleys of death, feeds you with his Body and Blood at Holy Communion even “in the presence of those who trouble (you)”, anoints you with the Holy Spirit, and precedes and follows you with his goodness and mercy both now and throughout eternity. And those are just some of the many ways the Lord your Shepherd looks out for you.

As your Shepherd the Lord cares about every detail of your life, even the details you do not care about. Scripture assures us that the Lord keeps all of your tears in a bottle (Psalm 56:8), knows the number of hairs on your head (Luke 12:7), lifts up the lowly (Luke 1:52), binds up the broken hearted (Psalm 147:3). There is not a single detail in your life that the Lord your Shepherd does not care about. With about seven billion people on the planet this sounds too good to be true, but it is true, very true—it is the gospel.

About twenty years ago I experienced an unforgettable reminder that the Lord is my shepherd who cares about the details in my personal life. My family and I were living in a two bedroom townhouse in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina at the time—four kids at home and a fifth on the way. I was working fulltime as a youth minister, taking seminary classes on the side, and gradually working through the ordination process in the Diocese of South Carolina.

Part of this ordination process involved a battery of examinations—physical exams, psychological exams, criminal and financial background checks, as well as a standardized test called the Miller Analogies Test (MAT). Perhaps you have taken the MAT, but either way, it is a standardized test for graduate school that back then consisted of one hundred questions in fifty minutes to get a sense of your analytical and logical skills, or lack thereof.

On a cool Saturday morning I drove in my 1989 Honda Accord from Mt. Pleasant over the old Cooper River Bridge into Charleston and arrived at The Citadel. As I pulled into the parking lot I had this overwhelming and crystal clear sense that I should look up the word “bucolic” in my MAT study guide that was in the passenger seat. It felt so random, but I looked it up—“bucolic”: adjective meaning “pastoral.” Then I prayed and went in to take the test.

Four or five questions into the MAT guess what word was in the test question? Yes, “bucolic.” What are the odds of that? I actually started chuckling with relief which a stern ahem from the grim test administrator quickly quelled, but I was overwhelmed with relief. I knew it was not a coincidence that as my Shepherd the Lord actually cared about the details of my personal life all the way down to a specific question in a Miller Analogies Test. Could the Lord be any more pastoral than that? This is all true by the way—I am not creative enough to make that up.

And the Lord your Shepherd cares about every detail in your life, even more than you do, because the Lord your Shepherd cares about you more than you could ever care about yourself. Late in his life the Apostle Peter wrote, “Cast all your anxiety on (God), because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). Earlier in this same epistle, in today’s appointed passage, we see just how much Jesus Christ, the Lord your Shepherd, cares for you:

He himself bore our sins in his body in the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:24-25).

The Lord your shepherd cares so much about you that when you get lost like a sheep, when you go astray like a sheep, the Lord your Shepherd will not stop, will never ever stop, searching for you until he finds you and brings you home.

We see this again and again in scripture. In an Old Testament passage from the great prophet Isaiah we read: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). In the New Testament Jesus told a parable that emphasizes this same thing:

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:4-7).

Jesus later identified himself as the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for the sheep (John 10:11) and “the Son of Man (who) came to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). This applies to everyone, including you, because indeed “all we like sheep have gone astray”, because “righteous persons who need no repentance” do not exist. This is where the gospel connects your life because again, as Peter wrote in today’s passage, “you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”

The reason lost sheep return to God is *not* because the lost sheep suddenly figure out where they are and decide to return home (or else they would not be “lost” to begin with). The reason lost sheep return to God is because Jesus Christ your Good Shepherd searches for you until he finds you. In other words, “you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls” because Jesus Christ is the Shepherd and Guardian of *your* soul who found you and carried you back.

As you know, the world is not always a “bucolic”, pastoral place in the pleasant sense of the word—with green pastures, a light breeze, lots of food and water, lots of love and laughter. The world is full of lost sheep, lost sheep that are scared, lost sheep that fight, lost sheep that are wounded—lost sheep vulnerable to the elements, vulnerable to predators, vulnerable to pandemics, vulnerable to the “thief (who) comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” But Jesus became incarnate so lost sheep, including you, “may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Many years ago in the summer of 1977 my family and I went to Virginia Beach for a week. I was eight years old and it is my earliest memory of going to the beach. My dad rented me an inflatable raft—navy blue in the middle, bright yellow on the ends (yes, just like those in the classic 1975 movie *Jaws*). I spent all day long paddling out into the ocean and riding the waves back in, over and over and over.

But one time, completely unexpectedly, a rip tide suddenly whisked me out to sea. It happened so quickly, and I was so scared...especially when I thought about the movie *Jaws* and what happened to the kid on the raft just like mine. In the ever increasing distance I saw a lifeguard standing on his high wooden white chair, waving his arms at me to come back, blowing his whistle to warn me to come back...but I could not come back because the rip tide was stronger than me and I was on the verge of being lost at sea. I paddled furiously, even slid off the raft and tried doggy paddling and pulling the raft with me but in spite of all my efforts I just kept slipping farther away, becoming more and more lost by the second.

Finally a different life guard swam out to me. It took quite a long while because I was way out at this point, but he did not stop, he would not stop until he found me. As he drew near I thought I would “help him out” and “do my part” so I slid off the raft again and tried to doggy paddle toward him. I’ll never forget what he said when he finally arrived, “It’s gonna be okay. Get back on the raft. I got you.” And he brought me back to shore—no lectures, no disclaimers, just lots of rejoicing back on shore.

You know where this is going.

“You were going astray like sheep” Peter wrote, “but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” Jesus did not stand on a high white wooden chair waving at a lost world, waving at you, to come back. Jesus did not stand on a high white wooden chair blowing a whistle at a lost world, blowing a whistle at you, to come back. Instead, Jesus swam out, way out, into the depths of the sea and would not and did not stop until he found you. You might have thought, or still might think, you can help Jesus out by sliding off the raft and doggy paddling, but the lifeguard’s words to me back in the day are Jesus’ words to you today, right now, on Good Shepherd Sunday, “It’s gonna be okay. Get back on the raft. I got you.”

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all”...Jesus swam all the way out to the lost world, all the way out to you, only to be lifted up on a high rough, filthy, bloody wooden cross, where, as Peter also wrote, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross...by his wounds you have been healed.” On Good Friday Jesus revealed his full identity as the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for a world of lost sheep, who lay down his life for you. “And I, when I am lifted up the earth,” the Lord your Shepherd said, “will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). That is what Jesus did, and that is what Jesus still does.

Hanging on the wall by the main door to my office there is an icon of Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd, with the cross in the background. It is Jesus Christ the risen Good Shepherd, with holes in his hands to remind us that “he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross.” And resting on his shoulders is sheep that was lost but has been found, a sheep that was lost at sea until Jesus swam all the way out to bring it back, a sheep Jesus Christ the Risen Good Shepherd gently and securely holds in his scarred hands. This icon is a visual reminder that the gospel is not about how much you hold onto the Good Shepherd, but rather how much the Good Shepherd holds onto you.

And today, right now on this Good Shepherd Sunday, Jesus still cares about you more than you care about yourself, still cares about every detail of your life—and is still gently and securely holding you because he forever remains the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

Amen.