

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“Jesus Christ: Your Good Shepherd” (Psalm 23)
April 25, 2021
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today is one of my favorite Sundays of the year: the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday. Jesus Christ is not only the Son of God, not only the Creator and Sustainer of all things, not only the Savior and Redeemer of the world, not only the Alpha and Omega, not only the Lion of the Tribe of Judah and the Bright Morning Star, not only the Rose of Sharon and the Lilly of the Valleys, not only the King of Kings and Lord of Lords... Jesus Christ is also *your* Good Shepherd. This is true not only corporately but also individually—as we prayed in the beautiful collect for today: “O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name” (*The Book of Common Prayer* 225).

On Good Shepherd Sunday we always read Psalm 23, perhaps the most famous psalm of all. Last week we saw in the gospel passage how the Risen Christ taught his disciples that the entire Old Testament points to him as the Messiah who died on the cross and was raised from the dead because God loves the world—and you—that much, so today I am going to preach on how each verse of Psalm 23 (*BCP* 612-613) points to a specific way Jesus Christ is *your* Good Shepherd.

“The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not be in want”... Jesus has not delegated his job as being your good shepherd to someone else—as Jesus said specifically in today’s gospel reading, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). Jesus did not say, “I’ll touch base with the good shepherd and his people will reach out to your people” but “I am the good shepherd.” In each of Jesus’ “I am” sayings in the Gospel According to John (I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the good shepherd, etc.) John uses the Greek phrase *ego eimi*, translated “I, I am” which hearkens back to how God in the burning bush revealed himself to Moses as “I Am Who I Am.” So when Jesus assures you, “I am the good shepherd” he assures you that Almighty God, “I Am Who I Am” is your good shepherd who knows you, loves you, and calls you by name.

As your good shepherd “I Am Who I Am” is also your provider who provides what you really need, even if—or at least for me, especially if—it is something I did not even know I needed. I think singer-songwriter Sheryl Crow was right when she sang, “It’s not having what you want; it’s wanting what you’ve got” (from her 2002 hit “Soak Up the Sun”)—and that the Rolling Stones were also right when they sang, “You can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometime you just may find you get what you need” (from their 1969 album *Let It Bleed*). But when the psalmist writes “The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not be in want” it goes much deeper than that—because what most people want is real love and real acceptance and real mercy and real forgiveness and a real second chance and real grace and real life—and Jesus your Good Shepherd offers you all that and much, much more. Lest you think God is a “waste not, want not” God, remember that in John’s account of the feeding of the five thousand there was so much bread and fish that John wrote that the crowd ate “as much as they *wanted*” (not needed, wanted)—and the disciples still gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. Why does the Lord your shepherd give you more than you need and more than you want? So you can give it away to others, but that’s another sermon for another time.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters”... We live in a culture that has a pathological obsession with “being productive” and an equal pathological revulsion toward rest. Even in the church, especially, in the church, we completely blow off God’s commandment to rest on the sabbath day. No matter how much we get done or how fast we get those things done we still feel like we’re not getting enough done and run ourselves ragged and then brag about it—“I’m soooo busy, crazy busy, there’s just not enough time in the day.” Even when the needle on our emotional gas gage is in the red and near “E” for “empty” we still run ourselves ragged until like Jackson Browne famously sang, we find ourselves “running on empty”...and we feel guilty for resting at all.

If you simply refuse to stop, to rest on the sabbath, eventually in one way or another the Lord your shepherd will make you lie down in green pastures even though you may want to run past them—and lead you beside still waters as opposed to the Class 5 whitewater rapids you think you prefer. Your Good Shepherd’s invitation still stands: “Come to me all that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). When you respond to that gracious invitation and rest, you may find that the world will still keep turning.

“He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake”... You may try to revive your own soul, to bring new life to your soul, but only your Good Shepherd can do that, because your Good Shepherd is the One who created your soul in the first place. Moreover, your Good Shepherd will never ever lead you down the wrong road, which is very good news if you are anything like me and do not need any help finding the wrong road. This is actually good news for everyone, no exceptions, as scripture tells us, “all we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6). And yet no matter what, Jesus remains your Good Shepherd who proclaimed that he specifically came to earth “to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). This means if there is a situation or circumstance in which you feel lost at this very moment, there is Someone seeking you out—and this same Someone will not stop until he saves you and brings you through that situation or circumstance.

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me”... Over the past year COVID 19 has made this “valley of the shadow of death” especially long and treacherous—but there is a much greater shadow that swallows this up, what the psalmist calls “the shadow of the Almighty” (Psalm 91:1). No matter how devastating the valley of the shadow of death may become, even if it leads to your physical death, the love of your Good Shepherd still remains stronger, because in his death and resurrection “death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54).

“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me”... The gospel is always a word of comfort. I have shared before that when I was in seminary a homiletics (preaching) professor taught us “a good preacher will comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” and while I initially thought that sounded correct, it actually falls short... because no one is comfortable. Are you? I would guess that every single one of you has at least one area of your life—either externally or internally—that is making you very, very *uncomfortable*. That is why your Good Shepherd preached, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4) and also why your Good Shepherd sends you the Holy Spirit, the Holy Comforter (John 14:26, KJV) to minister that comfort personally to you. Together the rod and staff of your Good Shepherd form the most comforting symbol of all: the cross, where your Good Shepherd was himself afflicted on your behalf so that you could be comforted where you need it most.

“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over”...The night before your Good Shepherd died on the cross for you he spread a table before his disciples—even Judas Iscariot who would trouble him more than you or I could ever imagine—and instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion. When you receive Holy Communion, with your empty hands—and perhaps your heart wounded by those who trouble you—your Good Shepherd feeds and fortifies your soul. In scripture anointing someone with oil signifies healing, acceptance, being set apart for something special, and most of all being filled and covered with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Comforter—and not just a little bit because your “cup is running over.” God’s love and grace for you is always more than enough.

“Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”...When you are driving and see a police car in your rearview mirror, how do you feel? Maybe some of you like it, but I always feel on edge and make sure that yes, I have my seatbelt on and yes, I am going just a couple miles above the speed limit, and yes, my license and registration are up to date—and when that police car passes or turns onto a different road, I am always relieved. When it comes to the rearview mirror of your life, you will always see something different: the “goodness and mercy” of your Good Shepherd, who always has your back. When Jesus died for you he fulfilled the law in your place, so that as Paul wrote to the Romans, “you are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14). Moreover, this “goodness and mercy” of your Good Shepherd will follow you all the days of your life.

“And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”...At the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples, “In my father’s house there are many dwelling places...and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2-3). And the very next day Jesus Christ, who proclaimed, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11) did just that in his death on the cross because yes, God loves you that much. Jesus Christ your Good Shepherd always keeps his promises, which means one day he will gently and graciously call you by name and take you too himself, so that you will indeed “dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Amen.