

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, B  
Acts 4:5-12  
Psalm 23  
I John 3:16-24  
John 10:11-18

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It's no wonder we love the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm so much. It speaks to the very heart of faith, where our spirits rest in God. It also speaks to the very heart of who God is for us — strong, dependable, patient, wise, caring, faithful, steadfast.

The image of the Good Shepherd is pretty distant from our everyday life in a city like Portland, but somehow it still speaks. We traditionally imagine the shepherd as a gentle figure, giving care to the sheep. We envision him carrying the injured lamb across his shoulders, or cradling it as in our stained-glass window – and we remember the times when our Shepherd God has carried us when we were hurt or scared.

The shepherd is gentle, but he also conveys power and authority. The shepherd leads the flock. He has to be far-seeing to scout out vegetation in a barren land. He has to be courageous to handle the dangers of wild animals, storms, and harsh terrain.

The quality I notice most is how dependable the shepherd has to be. He has to stay with the flock night and day, week in and week out. When dangers come, he can't just run away like the hired hand who cares more about his paycheck than the flock. The good shepherd stays with the sheep, sacrificing his own comfort and even risking his own safety to protect the ones in his care.

One reason the Good Shepherd image speaks to us is that we need all these qualities in our own lives and relationships. Our children need shepherd qualities in their lives. They need adults who will slow their pace to care for them gently and tenderly, being patient and attentive to what they need. Our friendships need shepherd qualities of quiet strength, trust, and dependability over the long haul. Our families and marriages need shepherd qualities of perseverance and steadfast commitment. We need what the Shepherd gives.

But in our society, where are the places where gentleness and trustworthiness truly valued? Where is self-sacrifice truly honored? Where are dependability and steadfastness rewarded? The world's ways have always contradicted the ways of God. As people of faith, we know where to find steadfastness and gentleness and courage and patience.

Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I’m not a hired hand who runs away when trouble comes. My sheep belong to me, and I will never desert them...” It means so much to know that Christ will stay beside us when the wolves come snarling around. One of our deepest fears is that we will be left alone in our dark times. That we will have to face old age alone. That no one will reach out to us when we are lonely. That when we go through struggles with our families, no one will be there to understand. Maybe we’ve had personal experience with fair-weather friends who suddenly faded away when our lives got messy.

That’s the human way, but it’s not our Lord’s way. Our Shepherd Lord will not be put off by any of the wolves that threaten us. Our Lord will not be intimidated by cancer or divorce or unemployment. Our Shepherd God has carried God’s people through every kind of dark valley, and God’s love will never fail us when we need it. That’s what it means to have a Shepherd God. God is steadfast. God is faithful. We can depend on God all the days of our life.

Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own, my own know me.” What beautiful words! We know our shepherd – AND – our shepherd knows us. And isn’t that one of the things we need most in life? To be known, truly known, by someone who loves us through and through... With God this is no dream – it is reality. Christ knows us intimately, knows our ways and our thoughts and our hopes. And Christ accepts us, just as we are, with complete forgiveness and complete commitment to us.

Nothing strengthens us more than having someone who is completely committed to us and to our well-being. A parent’s love can ground us in the kind of unconditional acceptance that strengthens us throughout our whole lifetime. A happy marriage can change a person, giving them a sense of security and letting them blossom in the strength of their partner’s love. And we’ve seen, too, how an attentive mentor or counselor or coach can help a young person flourish. I know a guy who was flunking out of graduate school until one particular professor took an interest in him and made him believe he could succeed. That professor shepherded him. And Christ the Good Shepherd does this for us — give us the particular attention we crave, takes the time to know us well, and lifts us up. We begin to see ourselves in a new way and live in that confidence.

We flourish in the shepherd’s tender care. And we learn what it is to shepherd others with kindness and courage and steadfast love. For besides being shepherded-ones, we are also shepherds in the many relationships and ministries where God has placed us.

Author Anne Lamott tells a modern parable of shepherding, inspired by a film she once viewed at her church in the San Francisco Bay area. She writes:

“One day our pastor Harrell showed a ten-minute movie that was one of the purest statements of faith I’ve ever seen. It was about a tall, sweet-looking blind man running in [a Bay-area cross-country race] on the arm of his best friend. This race [called the Dipsea race] starts inland and goes up and over Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, finishing up in the Pacific Ocean at Stinson Beach. It is grueling beyond words, very steeply uphill and then equally steeply down, exquisitely beautiful to look at, all woods and redwoods and rich rich earth and millions of wild animals. The trail lies on rugged, rocky terrain; it is hard to hike up and down it, let alone run. [She writes,] After one of those hikes I always end up feeling... incredibly old in the joints, especially in the knees, hobbling, panting, out of it.

“This movie tracked the two men amid several thousand people who run the race every year, serious runners and regular people together, as they headed up the steps that led to the mountain path... As they ran, the seeing man called out every root, every rock, holding the hand of his blind friend. They ran together joyfully, the seeing man calling, “Step, step, step, step, step,” as they went up and down 80-degree steps and “Roots roots roots,” as they navigated trails laced with huge tree roots. They ran bobbingly, like football players stepping quickly in and out of tires during practice. “Good good, uh-oh rock,” the seeing man would say. They both tripped a bunch of times, and the blind guy fell once, but mostly they seemed connected and safe.” (Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions*, PP 29-30, slightly adapted)

Anne Lamott sees this as an image of how God accompanies her, step by step, through life. She says, “I don’t know quite how it happened, that I came to faith; I think that at some point, a long time ago, I made a decision to believe, and then every step of the way, even through the worst of all I went through... I could feel the presence of something I could turn to, something that would keep me company, give me courage, be there with me, like the seeing man in the movie. The movie so exactly captured how I feel these days, that Jesus is with me everywhere I go.” (pp. 30-1)

That is our Good Shepherd. Jesus does go with us every place we go, uphill and downhill. Matching his steps to ours. Holding out a strong hand of connection and friendship. So that we can find our way.

Amen.